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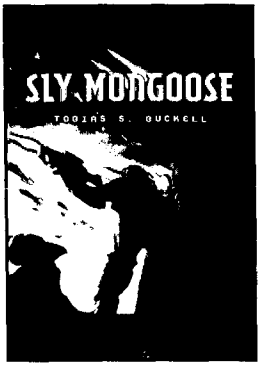

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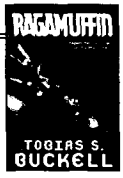

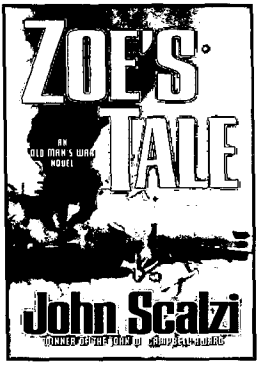

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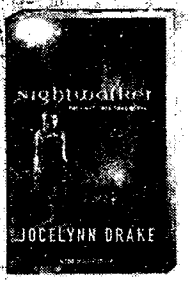

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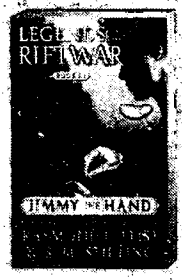

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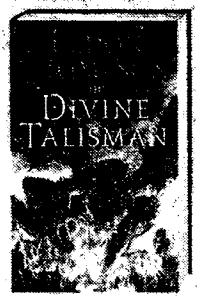

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

IT ISN'T every day that our own film editor, longtime contributor, and irrepressible gadfly is featured in his own documentary, so when Harlan Ellison's agent offered me a pass to see *Dreams with Sharp Teeth* screened in NYC, of course I said yes. (Thanks, Richard.)

Before I get into the movie though, let me answer one of our most frequently asked questions and explain Harlan's position as our film editor. Longtime readers know that Harlan was our primary film reviewer through the 1980s before passing the torch to Kathi Maio. He actually offered his resignation as our film editor several years ago — as I recall, it was after one of Lucius Shepard's reviews irked him — but I didn't accept it. As long as there's a chance that Mr. Ellison will contribute another film review to our pages, he remains our film editor.

Now, regarding the movie in question, it is (like most biographical documentaries) an attempt to capture the life and spirit of its subject. This film has interviews, archive clips, scenes of Harlan reading from his own work, and commentary from people who know Harlan well, like Neil Gaiman and Robin Williams. (I myself get a moment of screen time, from a panel Harlan and I did at the Nebula Awards in 2006, but if you glance down to find that last Goober in the candy box, you'll miss me.) Like the majority of documentaries I've seen, the film is a bit formless in structure, but there is some narrative arc to it, and I never found my attention wavering during the hour-and-a-half that the movie ran.

Of course, there's one big reason why the movie was compelling, and his initials are H.E. This is not one of those documentaries where a minor character steals the show. *Dreams with Sharp Teeth* is all Harlan.

It's Harlan the showman, reading

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from "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" and "The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore."

It's Harlan the businessman, discussing some of his business strategies and gloating over the dead gopher he mailed to a publishing executive back in the 1970s.

It's Harlan the friend, hanging around with some of his many amigos.

It's Harlan the artist, at work in his office and (in archive footage) in the window of a bookstore.

It's Harlan the meek, tentatively putting forth a humble opinion and virtually trembling in fear that someone might disagree.

Okay, I included that last one just to make sure you're still awake. If Harlan has ever done anything meekly, this film sure doesn't give an indication of it.

In fact, it's because of Harlan's less than bashful nature that I suspect *Dreams with Sharp Teeth* will not get many reliable reviews. Harlan is bold, brash, and hugely opinionated. It's hard to watch this movie with anything resembling critical detachment. People might hate parts of it, they might love it, but they're unlikely to have a dispassionate reaction to it.

And that's true to Ellison's spirit. As far as I can tell, Harlan has never done anything dispassionately — he cares, he cares if you care, and as a result, his work matters. That passion is one of the many reasons why his stories have been imprinted on my brain to such an extent that I can quote scenes and lines twenty-eight years after reading them, and one reason why I think readers will be reading his stories in the year 2114 and saying, "Where can I get more like this?"

I should mention another pair of reasons why I doubt you'll find many reliable reviews of the movie, but to do so, let me digress and tell you about the most entertaining panel I've ever seen at a science fiction convention. It took place in 1991 at the World Fantasy Convention in Tucson and the subject of the panel was, "How Do You Respond to a Negative Review." Gene Wolfe started things off by saying, "When I get a negative review, I look to see who wrote it, and I ask, 'What do I have on this guy? How can I get back at him?'" The other two panelists — Ed Bryant and Bill Warren (I think; maybe it was Bill Nolan) — scarcely got in a word before the last two panelists started. Robert Silverberg said, "I don't read my reviews. They're not written for

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me and they have nothing to say to me." To which Harlan replied with something akin to, "Are you kidding? Don't you want to hunt down these jerks and rip out their aortas?" What ensued was forty-five minutes of Bob and Harlan playing out a big-brother/little-brother relationship—much to the audience's amusement — and then wrapped up at the end when David Hartwell spoke up from the audience in favor of good, serious, well-considered reviews. All the panelists agreed that reviews are a worthy endeavor, especially when those reviews are evaluating someone else's work.

Since Harlan has made no secret of his feelings about unfavorable reviews, I suspect a lot of critics will resist tempting Harlan to rip out their aortas. I know I much prefer having mine in my chest rather than seeing it between Harlan's teeth.

The other reason you won't see many dispassionate reviews is that Harlan knows everybody. Everyone. The list of people whose paths cross Harlan's in just this one documentary is impressive: Tony Bennett, Gene Rodenberry, Tom Snyder, Richard Thompson, and droves more whom I can't recall now. (I wasn't taking notes.) Screenwriter Josh Olson *(A History of Violence)* came to the screening with the schoolteacher who turned him on to Harlan's work when he was thirteen. This guy Ellison has lived an outsized life....

...Which leads me to my biggest complaint about the film. Too many people are left out of it. Harlan himself told me that he encouraged filmmaker Erik Nelson to seek out some of Harlan's enemies, only to be told, "We don't need to. You're your own worst enemy." But it's not the commentary from Harlan's foes that I missed — it's the comments from people who know him best. Where are the interviews with Robert Silverberg and Norman Spinrad? Why are we deprived the great experience of hearing Michael Moorcock tell about the times when he picked Harlan up bodily and made a scene? And Susan — Harlan's wonderful wife — gets some screen time, but why so little commentary from her?

While I'm at it, let me ask too: why does the film lack interviews with any of Harlan's former wives? Even more importantly, Harlan mentions in the movie that he hasn't spoken with his sister since their mother died — but did that mean the filmmakers couldn't speak with her? *Dreams with Sharp Teeth* reminds me a lot of Terry

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Zwigoff's amazing documentary *Crumb*, about comix artist R. Crumb, but where Mr. Zwigoff struck gold in digging into his subject's family history, Erik Nelson shied away too much from delving into Harlan's family. The movie has a beautiful scene of Harlan watching some family films of his father (who died when he was thirteen). I wish it had dug deeper and found more.

Perhaps that's too much to ask from one documentary, but I must say that I think it's only right to demand excellence from a movie about a man who has spent his whole life fighting mediocrity.

I've read that *Dreams with Sharp Teeth* is due for theatrical release in June, so maybe some of you will have seen the film by the time you read this editorial. If so, I hope you'll take a minute to comment on our online forum, or to send us a line and sound off about the film. I'm particularly interested in finding out how the movie goes over with people who don't know Harlan already. Is it an intriguing introduction to a genius of a writer, or is it ninety minutes about a ranting lunatic?

Me, I think it's a good film about a great writer and I hope someday we'll see more about him. Meantime, I plan to follow up on something I learned from *Dreams* and see if I can find a copy of the one feature film written by Mr. Ellison. Harlan says *The Oscar* often winds up on lists of the worst movies of all time, but I want to see for myself. I seriously doubt that a movie written by Harlan is even half as bad as *Gigli*.

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Paolo Bacigalupi reports that he's currently working on a pair of novels, one set in the same universe as his story "Yellow Card Man" and the other in the Young Adult genre. His new story first appeared in his recent short story collection, as you might have guessed by the fact that the collection is titled Pump Six and Other Stories. *This tale is hard-hitting and it might not be appropriate for younger readers. (Then again, as noted in the editorial, screenwriter Josh Olson is still grateful to the teacher who gave him Harlan Ellison's* Deathbird Stories *at a young age.)*

Pump Six

By Paolo Bacigalupi

THE FIRST THING I SAW Thursday morning when I walked into the kitchen was Maggie's ass sticking up in the air. Not a bad way to wake up, really. She's got a good figure, keeps herself in shape, so a morning eyeful of her pretty bottom pressed against a black mesh nightie is generally a positive way to start the day.

Except that she had her head in the oven. And the whole kitchen smelled like gas. And she had a lighter with a blue flame six inches high that she was waving around inside the oven like it was a Tickle Monkey revival concert.

"Jesus Christ, Maggie! What the hell are you doing?"

I dove across the kitchen, grabbed a handful of nightie and yanked hard. Her head banged as she came out of the oven. Frying pans rattled on the stovetop and she dropped her lighter. It skittered across the tuffscuff, ending up in a corner. "Owwwwww!" She grabbed her head. "Oooowwww!"

She spun around and slapped me. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

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She raked her nails across my cheek, then went for my eyes. I shoved her away. She slammed into the wall and spun, ready to come back again. "What's the matter with you?" she yelled. "You pissed off you couldn't get it up last night? Now you want to knock me around instead?" She grabbed the cast-iron skillet off the stovetop, dumping NiftyFreeze bacon all over the burners. "You want to try again, trogwad? Huh? You want to?" She waved the pan, threatening, and started for me. "Come on then!"

I jumped back, rubbing my cheek where she'd gouged me. "You're crazy! I keep you from getting yourself blown up and you want to beat my head in?"

"I was making your damn breakfast!" She ran her fingers through her black tangled hair and showed me blood. "You broke my damn head!"

"I saved your dumb ass is what I did." I turned and started shoving the kitchen windows open, letting the gas escape. A couple of the windows were just cardboard curtains that were easy to pull free, but one of the remaining whole windows was really stuck.

"You sonofabitch!"

I turned just in time to dodge the skillet. I yanked it out of her hands and shoved her away, hard, then went back to opening windows. She came back, trying to get around in front of me as I pushed the windows open. Her nails were all over my face, scratching and scraping. I pushed her away again and waved the skillet when she tried to come back. "You want me to use this?"

She backed off, eyes on the pan. She circled. "That's all you got to say to me? 'I saved your dumb ass'?" Her face was red with anger. "How about 'Thanks for trying to fix the stove, Maggie,' or 'Thanks for giving a damn about whether I get a decent breakfast before work, Maggie.'" She hawked snot and spat, missing me and hitting the wall, then gave me the finger. "Make your own damn breakfast. See if I try to help you again."

I stared at her. "You're dumber than a sack of trogs, you know that?" I waved the skillet toward the stove. "Checking a gas leak with a lighter? Do you even have a brain in there? Hello? Hello?"

"Don't talk to me like that! You're the trogwad — " She choked off mid sentence and sat, suddenly, like she'd been hit in the head with a chunk of concrete rain. Just plopped on the yellow tuffscuff. Completely stunned.

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"Oh." She looked up at me, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry, Trav. I didn't even think of that." She stared at her lighter where it lay in the corner. "Oh, shit. Wow." She put her head in her hands. "Oh...Wow."

She started to hiccup, then to cry. When she looked up at me again, her big brown eyes were full of tears. "I'm so sorry. I'm really really sorry." The tears started rolling, pouring off her cheeks. "I had no idea. I just didn't think. I...."

I was still ready to fight, but seeing her sitting on the floor, all forlorn and lost and apologetic took it out of me.

"Forget it." I dropped the pan on the stove and went back to jamming open the windows. A breeze started moving through, and the gas stink faded. When we had some decent air circulation, I pulled the stove out from the wall. Bacon was scattered all over the burners, limp and thawed now that it was out of its NiftyFreeze cellophane, strips of pork lying everywhere, marbled and glistening with fat. Maggie's idea of a home-made breakfast. My granddad would have loved her. He was a big believer in breakfasts. Except for the NiftyFreeze. He hated those wrappers.

Maggie saw me staring at the bacon. "Can you fix the stove?"

"Not right now. I've got to get to work."

She wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand. "Waste of bacon," she said. "Sorry."

"No big deal."

"I had to go to six different stores to find it. That was the last package, and they didn't know when they were going to get more."

I didn't have anything to say to that. I found the gas shut-off and closed it. Sniffed. Then sniffed all around the stove and the rest of kitchen.

The gas smell was almost gone.

For the first time, I noticed my hands were shaking. I tried to get a coffee packet out of the cabinet and dropped it. It hit the counter with a water balloon plop. I set my twitching hands flat on the counter and leaned on them, hard, trying to make them go still. My elbows started shaking instead. It's not every morning you almost get yourself blown up.

It was kind of funny, though, when I thought about it. Half the time, the gas didn't even work. And on the one day it did, Maggie decided to play repairman. I had to suppress a giggle.

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Maggie was still in the middle of the floor, snuffling. "I'm really sorry," she said again.

"It's okay. Forget it." I took my hands off the counter. They weren't flapping around anymore. That was something. I ripped open the coffee packet and chugged its liquid cold. After the rest of the morning, the caffeine was calming.

"No, I'm really sorry. I could have got us both killed."

I wanted to say something nasty but there wasn't any point. It just would have been cruel. "Well, you didn't. So it's okay." I pulled out a chair and sat down and looked out the open windows. The city's sky was turning from yellow dawn smog to a gray-blue morning smog. Down below, people were just starting their day. Their noises filtered up: Kids shouting on their way to school. Hand carts clattering on their way to deliveries. The grind of some truck's engine, clanking and squealing and sending up black clouds of exhaust that wafted in through the window along with summer heat. I fumbled for my inhaler and took a hit, then made myself smile at Maggie. "It's like that time you tried to clean the electric outlet with a fork. You just got to remember not to look for gas leaks with a fire. It's not a good idea."

Wrong thing to say, I guess. Or wrong tone of voice.

Maggie's waterworks started again: not just the snuffling and the tears, but the whole bawling squalling release thing, water pouring down her face, her nose getting all runny and her saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again, like a Ya Lu aud sample, but without the subsonic thump that would have made it fun to listen to.

I stared at the wall for a while, trying to wait it out, and thought about getting my earbug and listening to some real Ya Lu, but I didn't want to wear out the battery because it took a while to find good ones, and anyway, it didn't seem right to duck out while she was bawling. So I sat there while she kept crying, and then I finally sucked it up and got down on the floor next to her and held her while she wore herself out.

Finally she stopped crying and started wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'll remember."

She must have seen my expression because she got more insistent. "Really. I will." She used the shoulder of her nightie on her runny nose. "I must look awful."

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She looked puffy and red-eyed and snotty. I said, "You look fine. Great. You look great."

"Liar." She smiled, then shook her head. "I didn't mean to melt down like that. And the frying pan...." She shook her head again. "I must be PMS-ing."

"You take a Gynoloft?"

"I don't want to mess with my hormones. You know, just in case...." She shook her head again. "I keep thinking maybe this time, but...." She shrugged. "Never mind. I'm a mess." She leaned against me again and went quiet for a little bit. I could feel her breathing. "I just keep hoping," she said finally.

I stroked her hair. "If it's meant to happen, it will. We've just got to stay optimistic."

"Sure. That's up to God. I know that. I just keep hoping."

"It took Miku and Gabe three years. We've been trying, what, six months?"

"A year, month after next." She was quiet, then said, "Lizzi and Pearl only had miscarriages."

"We've got a ways to go before we start worrying about miscarriages." I disentangled and went hunting for another coffee packet in the cabinets. This one I actually took the time to shake. It heated itself and I tore it open and sipped. Not as good as the little brewer I found for Maggie at the flea market so she could make coffee on the stove, but it was a damn sight better than being blown to bits.

Maggie was getting herself arranged, getting up off the floor and starting to bustle around. Even all puffy faced, she still looked good in that mesh nightie: lots of skin, lots of interesting shadows.

She caught me watching her. "What are you smiling at?"

I shrugged. "You look nice in that nightie."

"I got it from that lady's estate sale, downstairs. It's hardly even used."

I leered. "I like it."

She laughed. "Now? You couldn't last night or the night before, but now you want to do it?"

I shrugged.

"You're going to be late as it is." She turned and started rustling in the cabinets herself. "You want a brekkie bar? I found a whole bunch of them

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when I was shopping for the bacon. I guess their factory is working again." She tossed one before I could answer. I caught it and tore off the smiling foil wrapper and read the ingredients while I ate. Fig and Nut, and then a whole bunch of nutrients like dextro-forma-albuterolhyde. Not as neat as the chemicals that thaw NiftyFreeze packets, but what the hell, it's all nutritional, right?

Maggie turned and studied the stove where I'd marooned it. With hot morning air blowing in from the windows, the bacon was getting limper and greasier by the second. I thought about taking it downstairs and frying it on the sidewalk. If nothing else, I could feed it to the trogs. Maggie was pinching her lip. I expected her to say something about the stove or wasting bacon, but instead she said, "We're going out for drinks with Nora tonight. She wants to go to Wicky."

"Pus girl?"

"That's not funny."

I jammed the rest of the brekkie bar into my mouth. "It is to me. I warned both of you. That water's not safe for anything."

She made a face. "Well nothing happened to me, smarty pants. We all looked at it and it wasn't yellow or sludgy or anything — "

"So you jumped right in and went swimming. And now she's got all those funny zits on her. How mysterious." I finished the second coffee packet and tossed it and the brekkie bar wrapper down the disposal and ran some water to wash them down. In another half hour, they'd be whirling and dissolving in the belly of Pump Two. "You can't go thinking something's clean, just because it looks clear. You got lucky." I wiped my hands and went over to her. I ran my fingers up her hips.

"Yep. Lucky. Still no reaction."

She slapped my hands away. "What, you're a doctor, now?"

"Specializing in skin creams...."

"Don't be gross. I told Nora to meet us at eight. Can we go to Wicky?"

I shrugged. "I doubt it. It's pretty exclusive."

"But Max owes you — " she broke off as she caught me leering at her again. "Oh. Right."

"What do you say?"

She shook her head and grinned. "I should be glad, after the last couple nights."

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"Exactly." I leaned down and kissed her.

When she finally pulled back, she looked up at me with those big brown eyes of hers and the whole bad morning just melted away. "You're going to be late," she said.

But her body was up against mine, and she wasn't slapping my hands away anymore.

UMMER IN NEW YORK is one of my least favorite times. The heat sits down between the buildings, choking everything, and the air just...stops. You smell everything. Plastics melting into hot concrete, garbage burning, old urine that effervesces into the air when someone throws water into the gutter; just the plain smell of so many people living all packed together. Like all the skyscrapers are sweating alcoholics after a binge, standing there exhausted and oozing with the evidence of everything they've been up to. It drives my asthma nuts. Some days, I take three hits off the inhaler just to get to work.

About the only good thing about summer is that it isn't spring so at least you don't have freeze-thaw dropping concrete rain down on your head.

I cut across the park just to give my lungs a break from the ooze and stink, but it wasn't much of an improvement. Even with the morning heat still building up, the trees looked dusty and tired, all their leaves drooping, and there were big brown patches on the grass where the green had just given up for the summer, like bald spots on an old dog.

The trogs were out in force, lying in the grass, lolling around in the dust and sun, enjoying another summer day with nothing to do. The weather was bringing them out. I stopped to watch them frolicking — all hairy and horny without any concerns at all.

A while back someone started a petition to get rid of them, or at least to get them spayed, but the mayor came out and said that they had some rights, too. After all, they were somebody's kids, even if no one was admitting it. He even got the police to stop beating them up so much, which made the tabloids go crazy. They all said he had a trog love child hidden in Connecticut. But after a few years, people got used to having them around. And the tabloids went out of business, so the mayor didn't care what they said about his love children anymore.

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These days, the trogs are just part of the background, a whole parkful of mash-faced monkey people shambling around with bright yellow eyes and big pink tongues and not nearly enough fur to survive in the wild. When winter hits, they either freeze in piles or migrate down to warmer places. But every summer there's more of them.

When Maggie and I first started trying to have a baby, I had a nightmare that Maggie had a trog. She was holding it and smiling, right after the delivery, all sweaty and puffy and saying, "Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it beautiful?" and then she handed the sucker to me. And the scary thing wasn't that it was a trog; the scary thing was trying to figure out how I was going to explain to everyone at work that we were keeping it. Because I loved that little squash-faced critter. I guess that's what being a parent is all about.

That dream scared me limp for a month. Maggie put me on perkies because of it.

A trog sidled up. It — or he or she, or whatever you call a hermaphrodite critter with boobs and a big sausage — made kissy faces at me. I just smiled and shook my head and decided that it was a him because of his hairy back, and because he actually had that sausage, instead of just a little pencil like some of them have. The trog took the rejection pretty well. He just smiled and shrugged. That's one nice thing about them: they may be dumber than hamsters, but they're pleasant-natured. Nicer than most of the people I work with, really. Way nicer than some people you meet in the subway.

The trog wandered off, touching himself and grunting, and I kept going across the park. On the other side, I walked down a couple blocks to Freedom Street and then down the stairs into the command substation.

Chee was waiting for me when I unlocked the gates to let myself in.

"Alvarez! You're late, man."

Chee's a nervous skinny little guy with suspenders and red hair slicked straight back over a bald spot. He always has this acrid smell around him because of this steroid formula he uses on the bald spot, which makes his hair grow all right for a while, but then he starts picking at it compulsively and it all falls out and he has to start all over with the steroids, and in the meantime, he smells like the Hudson. And whatever the gel is, it makes his skull shine like a polished bowling ball. We used

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to tell him to stop using the stuff, but he'd go all rabid and try to bite you if you kept it up for long.

"You're late," he said again. He was scratching his head like an epileptic monkey trying to groom himself.

"Yeah? So?" I got my work jacket out of my locker and pulled it on. The fluorescents were all dim and flickery, but climate control was running, so the interior was actually pretty bearable, for once.

"Pump Six is broken."

"Broken how?"

Chee shrugged. "I don't know. It's stopped."

"Is it making a noise? Is it stopped all the way? Is it going slowly? Is it flooding? Come on, help me out."

Chee looked at me blankly. Even his head-picking stopped, for a second.

"You try looking at the troubleshooting indexes?" I asked.

Chee shrugged. "Didn't think of it."

"How many times have I told you, that's the first thing you do? How long has it been out?"

"Since midnight?" He screwed up his face, thinking. "No, since ten."

"You switch the flows over?"

He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Forgot."

I started to run. "The entire Upper West Side doesn't have sewage processing since LAST NIGHT? Why didn't you call me?"

Chee jogged after me, dogging my heels as we ran through the plant's labyrinth to the control rooms. "You were off duty."

"So you just let it sit there?"

It's hard to shrug while you're running full-out, but Chee managed it. "Stuff's broken all the time. I didn't figure it was that bad. You know, there was that bulb out in tunnel three, and then there was that leak from the toilets. And then the drinking fountain went out again. You always let things slide. I figured I'd let you sleep."

I didn't bother trying to explain the difference. "If it happens again, just remember, if the pumps, any of them, die, you call me. It doesn't matter where I am, I won't be mad. You just call me. If we let these pumps go down, there's no telling how many people could get sick. There's bad stuff in that water, and we've got to stay on top of it, otherwise it bubbles

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up into the sewers and then it gets out in the air, and people get sick. You got it?"

I shoved open the doors to the control room, and stopped.

The floor was covered with toilet paper, rolls of it, all unstrung and dangled around the control room. Like some kind of mummy striptease had gone wrong. There must have been a hundred rolls unraveled all over the floor. "What the hell is this?"

"This?" He looked around, scratching his head.

"The paper, Chee."

"Oh. Right. We had a toilet paper fight last night. For some reason they triple delivered. We didn't have enough space in the storage closet. I mean, we haven't had ass wipes for two months, and then we had piles and piles of it — "

"So you had a toilet paper fight while Pump Six was down?"

Something in my voice must have finally gotten through. He cringed. "Hey, don't look at me that way. I'll get it picked up. No worries. Jeez. You're worse than Mercati. And anyway, it wasn't my fault. I was just getting ready to reload the dispensers and then Suze and Zoo came down and we got into this fight." He shrugged. "It was just something to do, that's all. And Suze started it, anyway."

I gave him another dirty look and kicked my way through the tangle of t.p. to the control consoles.

Chee called after me, "Hey, how am I going to wind it back up if you kick it around?"

I started throwing switches on the console, running diagnostics. I tried booting up the troubleshooting database, but got a connection error. Big surprise. I looked on the shelves for the hard copies of the operation and maintenance manuals, but they were missing. I looked at Chee. "Do you know where the manuals are?"

"The what?"

I pointed at the empty shelves.

"Oh. They're in the bathroom."

I looked at him. He looked back at me. I couldn't make myself ask. I just turned back to the consoles. "Go get them, I need to figure out what these flashers mean." There was a whole panel of them winking away at me, all for Pump Six.

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Chee scuttled out of the room, dragging t.p. behind him. Overhead, I heard the Observation Room door open: Suze, coming down the stairs. More trouble. She rustled through the t.p. streamers and came up close behind me, crowding. I could feel her breathing on my neck.

"The pump's been down for almost twelve hours," she said. "I could write you up." She thumped me in the back, hard. "I could write you up, buddy." She did it again, harder. *Bam.*

I thought about hitting her back, but I wasn't going to give her another excuse to dock pay. Besides, she's bigger than me. And she's got more muscles than an orangutan. About as hairy, too. Instead, I said, "It would have helped if somebody had called."

"You talking back to me?" She gave me another shove and leaned around to get in my face, looking at me all squinty-eyed. "Twelve hours down-time," she said again. "That's grounds for a write-up. It's in the manual. I can do it."

"No kidding? You read that? All by yourself?"

"You're not the only one who can read, Alvarez." She turned and stomped back up the stairs to her office.

Chee came back lugging the maintenance manuals. "I don't know how you do this," he puffed as he handed them over. "These manuals make no sense at all."

"It's a talent."

I took the plastirene volumes and glanced up at Suze's office. She was just standing there, looking down at me through the observation glass, looking like she was going to come down and beat my head in. A dimwit promo who got lucky when the old boss went into retirement.

She has no idea what a boss does, so mostly she spends her time scowling at us, filling out paperwork that she can't remember how to route, and molesting her secretary. Employment guarantees are great for people like me, but I can see why you might want to fire someone; the only way Suze was ever going to leave was if she fell down the Observation Room stairs and broke her neck.

She scowled harder at me, trying to make me look away. I let her win. She'd either write me up, or she wouldn't. And even if she did, she might still get distracted and forget to file it. At any rate, she couldn't fire me. We were stuck together like a couple of cats tied in a sack.

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I started thumbing through the manuals' plastic pages, going back and forth through the indexes as I cross-referenced all the flashers. I looked up again at the console. There were a lot of them. Maybe more than I'd ever seen.

Chee squatted down beside me, watching. He started picking his head again. I think it's a comfort thing for him. But it makes your skin crawl until you get used to it. Makes you think of lice.

"You do that fast," he said. "How come you didn't go to college?"

"You kidding?"

"No way, man. You're the smartest guy I ever met. You totally could have gone to college."

I glanced over at him, trying to tell if he was screwing with me. He looked back at me, completely sincere, like a dog waiting for a treat. I went back to the manual. "No ambition, I guess."

The truth was that I never made it through high school. I dropped out of P.S. 105 and never looked back. Or forward, I guess. I remember sitting in freshman algebra and watching the teacher's lips flap and not understanding a word he was saying. I turned in worksheets and got Ds every time, even after I redid them. None of the other kids were complaining, though. They just laughed at me when I kept asking him to explain the difference between squaring and doubling variables. You don't have to be Einstein to figure out where you don't belong.

I started piecing my way through the troubleshooting diagrams. No clogs indicated. Go to Mechanics Diagnostics, Volume Three. I picked up the next binder of pages and started flipping. "Anyway, you've got a bad frame of reference. We aren't exactly a bunch of Nobel Prize winners here." I glanced up at Suze's office. "Smart people don't work in dumps like this." Suze was scowling down at me again. I gave her the universal salute. "You see?"

Chee shrugged. "I dunno. I tried reading that manual about twenty times on the john, and it still doesn't make any sense to me. If you weren't around, half the city would be swimming in shit right now."

Another flasher winked on the console: amber, amber, red.... It stayed red.

"In a couple minutes they're going to be swimming in a lot worse than that. Believe me, buddy, there's lots worse things than shit. Mercati

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showed me a list once, before he retired. All the things that run through here that the pumps are supposed to clean: polychlorinated biphenyls, bisphenyl-A, estrogen, phlalates, PCBs, heptachlor...."

"I got a Super Clean sticker for all that stuff." He lifted his shirt and showed me the one he had stuck to his skin, right below his rib cage. A yellow smiley face sticker a little like the kind I used to get from my grandpa when he was feeling generous. It said SUPER CLEAN on the smiley's forehead.

"You buy those?"

"Sure. Seven bucks for seven. I get 'em every week. I can drink the water straight, now. I'd even drink out of the Hudson." He started scratching his skull again.

I watched him scratch for a second, remembering how zit girl Nora had tried to sell some to Maria before they went swimming. "Well, I'm glad it's working for you." I turned and started keying restart sequences for the pumps. "Now let's see if we can get this sucker started up, and keep all the neighbors who don't buy stickers from having a pack of trogs. Get ready to pull a reboot on my say-so."

Chee went over to clear the data lines and put his hands on the restart levers. "I don't know what difference it makes. I went through the park the other day and you know what I saw? A mama trog and five little baby trogs. What good does it do to keep trogs from getting born to good folks, when you got those ones down in the park making whole litters?"

I looked over at Chee to say something back, but he kind of had a point. The reboot sequences completed and Pump Six's indicators showed primed. "Three...two...one.... Primed full," I said. "Go. Go. Go."

Chee threw his levers and the consoles cleared green and somewhere deep down below us, sewage started pumping again.

WE CLIMBED THE SKIN of the Kusovic Center, climbing for heaven, climbing for Wicky. Maggie and Nora and Wu and me, worming our way up through stairwell turns, scrambling over rubble, kicking past condom wrappers and scattering Effy packets like autumn leaves. Wicky's synthesized xylophones and Japanese kettle drums thrummed, urging us higher. Trogs and sadsack partiers who didn't have my connections

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watched jealously as we climbed. Watched and whispered as we passed them by, all of them knowing that Max owed me favors and favors and favors and that I went to the front of the line because I kept the toilets running on time.

The club was perched at the very top of the Kusovic, a bunch of old stock broker offices. Max had torn down the glass cubicles and the old digital wallscreens that used to track the NYSE and had really opened the space up. Unfortunately, the club wasn't much good in the winter anymore because we'd all gotten rowdy one night and shoved out the windows. But even if it was too damn breezy half the year, watching those windows falling had been a major high point at the club. A couple years later people were still talking about it, and I could still remember the slow way they came out of their frames and tumbled and sailed through the air. And when they hit bottom, they splashed across the streets like giant buckets of water.

At any rate, the open-air thing worked really good in the summer, with all the rolling brownouts that were always knocking out the A/C.

I got a shot of Effy as we went in the door, and the club rode in on a wave of primal flesh, a tribal gathering of sweaty jumping monkeys in half-torn business suits, all of us going crazy and eyeball wide until our faces were as pale and big as fish wallowing in the bottom of the ocean.

Maggie was smiling at me as we danced and our whole oven fight was completely behind us. I was glad about that, because after our fork-in-the-outlet fight, she acted like it was my fault for a week, even after she said she forgave me. But now, in the dance throb of Wicky, I was her white knight again, and I was glad to be with her, even if it meant dragging Nora along.

All the way up the stairs, I'd tried to not stare at Nora's zit-pocked skin or make fun of her swollen-up face but she knew what I was thinking because she kept giving me dirty looks whenever I warned her to step around places where the stairway was crumbling. Talk about stupid, though. She's about as sharp as a marble. I won't drink or swim in any of the water around here. It comes from working with sewage all the time. You know way too much about everything that goes in and out of the system. People like Nora put a Kali-Mary pendant between their tits or stick a Super Clean smiley to their ass cheek and hope for the best. I drink

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bottled water and only shower with a filter head. And sometimes I still get creeped out. No pus rashes, though.

The kettle drums throbbed inside my eyeballs. Across the club, Nora was dancing with Wu and now that my Effy was kicking into overdrive, I could see her positive qualities: she danced fast and furious...her hair was long and black...her zits were the size of breasts.

They looked succulent.

I sidled up to her and tried to apologize for not appreciating her before, but between the noise and my slobbering on her skin, I guess I failed to communicate effectively. She ran away before I could make it up to her and I ended up bouncing alone in Wicky's kettle drum womb while the crowds rode in and out around me and the Effy built up in ocean throbs that ran from my eyeballs to my crotch and back again, bouncing me higher and higher and higher....

A girl in torn knee socks and a nun's habit was mewling in the bathroom when Maggie found us and pulled us apart and took me on the floor with people walking around us and trying to use the stainless steel piss troughs, but then Max grabbed me and I couldn't tell if we'd been doing it on the bar and if that was the problem or if I was just taking a leak in the wrong place but Max kept complaining about bubbles in his gin and a riot a riot a RIOT that he was going to have on his hands if these Effy freaks didn't get their liquor and he shoved me down under the bar where tubes come out of vats of gin and tonic and it was like floating inside the guts of an octopus with the waves of the kettle drums booming away above me.

I wanted to sleep down there, maybe hunt for the nun's red panties except that Max kept coming back to me with more Effy and saying we had to find the problem, the bubbly problem the bubbly problem, take some of this it will clear your damn head, find where the bubbles come from, where they fill the gin. No no no! The tonic the tonic the tonic! No bubbles in the tonic. Find the tonic. Stop the RIOT, make it all okay before the gag-gas trucks come and shut us down and dammit what are you sniffing down under there?

Swimming under the bar.... Swimming long and low...eyeballs wide...prehistoric fishy amongst giant mossy root-laced eggs, buried under the mist of the swamp, down with the bar rags and the lost spoons

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and the sticky slime of bar sugar, and these huge dead silver eggs lying under the roots, growing moss and mildew but nothing else, no yolky tonic coming out of these suckers, been sucked dry, sucked full dry by too many thirsty dinosaurs and of course that's the problem. No tonic. None. None at all.

More eggs! More eggs! We need more eggs! More big silver tonic dispensing eggs need to rumble in on handtrucks and roll in on whitejacketed bow-tie bartender backs. More eggs need to take the prod from the long root green sucking tubes and then we can suck the tonic of their yolk out, and Max can keep on making g-and-t's and I'm a hero hey hey hey a hero a goddamn superstar because I know a lot about silver eggs and how to stick in the right tubes and isn't that why Maggie's always pissed at me because my tube is never ready to stick into her eggs, or maybe she's got no eggs to stick and we sure as hell aren't going to the doctor to find out she's got no eggs and no replacements either, not a single one coming in on a handtruck and isn't that why she's out in the crowd bouncing in a black corset with a guy licking her feet and giving me the finger?

And isn't that why we're going to have a RIOT now when I beat that trogwad's head in with this chunk of bar that I'm going to get Max to loan me...except I'm too far underwater to beat up boot licker. And little smoking piles of Effy keep blooming on the floor, and we're all lapping them up because I'm a goddamn hero a hero a hero, the fixit man of all fixit men, and everyone bows and scrapes and passes me Effy because there isn't going to be a RIOT and we won't get shut down with gag-gas, and we won't do the vomit crawl down the stairwells to the streets.

And then Max shoves me back onto the dance floor with more shots of Effy for Maggie, a big old tray of forgiveness, and forgiveness comes easy when we're all walking on the ceiling of the biggest oldest skyscraper in the sky.

Blue kettle drums and eyeball nuns. Zits and dinner dates. Down the stairs and into the streets.

By the time we stumbled out of Wicky I was finally coming out of the Effy folds but Maggie was still flying, running her hands all over me, touching me, telling me what she was going to do to me when we got

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home. Nora and Wu were supposed to be with us, but somehow we'd gotten separated. Maggie wasn't interested in waiting around so we headed uptown, stumbling between the big old city towers, winding around sidewalk stink ads for Diabolo and Possession, and dodging fishdog stands with after-bar octopi on a stick.

The night was finally cool, in the sweet spot between end of midnight swelter and beginning of morning smother. There was a blanket of humidity, wet on us, and seductive after the club. Without rain or freezes, I barely had to watch for concrete rain at all.

Maggie ran her hands up and down my arm as we walked, occasionally leaning in close to kiss my cheek and nibble on my ear. "Max says you're amazing. You saved the day."

I shrugged. "It wasn't a big deal."

The whole bar thing was pretty hazy, bubbled-out by all the Effy I'd done. My skin was still singing from it. Mostly what I had was a warm glow right in my crotch and a stuttery view of the dark streets and the long rows of candles in the windows of the towers, but Maggie's hand felt good, and she looked good, and I had some plans of my own for when we got back to the apartment, so I knew I was coming down nice and slow, like falling into a warm featherbed full of helium and tongues.

"Anyone could have figured out his tonic was empty, if we hadn't all been so damn high." I stopped in front of a bank of autovendors. Three of them were sold out, and one was broken open, but there were still a couple drinks in the last one. I dropped my money in and chose a bottle of Blue Vitality for her, and a Sweatshine for me. It was a pleasant surprise when the machine kicked out the bottles.

"Wow!" Maggie beamed at me.

I grinned and fished out her bottle. "Lucky night, I guess: first the bar, now this."

"I don't think the bar thing was luck. I wouldn't have thought of it." She downed her Blue Vitality in two long swallows, and giggled. "And you did it when your eyes were as big as a fish. You were doing handstands on the bar."

I didn't remember that. Bar sugar and red lace bras, I remembered. But not handstands. "I don't see how Max keeps that place going when he can't even remember to restock."

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Maggie rubbed up against me. "Wicky's a lot better than most clubs. And anyway, that's why he's got you. A real live hero." She giggled again. "I'm glad we didn't have to fight our way out of another riot. I hate that."

In an alley, some trogs were making it. Clustered bodies, hermaphroditic, climbing on each other and humping, their mouths open, smiling and panting. I glanced at them and kept going, but Maggie grabbed my arm and tugged me back.

The trogs were really going at it, all in a flounder, three of them piled, their skins gleaming with sweat slick and saliva. They looked back at us with yellow eyes and not a bit of shame. They just smiled and got into a heavy groaning rhythm.

"I can't believe how much they *do* it," Maggie whispered. She gripped my arm, pressing against me. "They're like dogs."

"That's about how smart they are."

They changed positions, one crouching as though Maggie's words had inspired them. The others piled on top of him...or her. Maggie's hand slid to the front of my pants, fumbled with the zipper and reached inside. "They're so.... Oh, God." She pulled me close and started working on my belt, almost tearing at it.

"What the hell?" I tried to push her off, but she was all over me, her hands reaching inside my pants, touching me, making me hard. The Effy was still working, that was for sure.

"Let's do it, too. Here. I want you."

"Are you crazy?"

"They don't care. Come on. Maybe this time it'll take. Knock me up." She touched me, her eyes widening at my sudden size. "You're never like this." She touched me again. "Oh God. Please." She pressed herself against me, looking over at the trogs. "Like that. Just like that." She pulled off her shimmersilk blouse, exposing her black corset and the pale skin of her breasts.

I stared at her skin and curves. That beautiful body she'd teased me with all night long. Suddenly I didn't care about the trogs or the few people walking by on the street. We both yanked at my belt. My pants fell down around my ankles. We slammed up against the alley wall, pressing against old concrete and staring into each other's eyes and then she pulled me into

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her and her lips were on my ear, biting and panting and whispering as we moved against each other.

The trogs just grinned and grinned and watched us with their big yellow eyes as we all shared the alley, and all watched each other.

AT FIVE IN THE MORNING, Chee called again, his voice coming straight into my head through my earbug. In all the excitement and Effy, I'd forgotten to take it out. Pump Six was down again. "You said I was supposed to call you," he whined.

I groaned and dragged myself out of bed. "Yeah. Yeah. I did. Don't worry about it. You did good. I'll be there."

Maggie rolled over. "Where you going?"

I pulled on my pants and gave her a quick kiss. "Got to go save the world."

"They work you too hard. I don't think you should go."

"And let Chee sort it out? You've got to be kidding. We'd be up to our necks in sludge by dinner time."

"My hero." She smiled sleepily. "See if you can find me some donuts when you come back. I feel pregnant."

She looked so happy and warm and fuzzy I almost climbed back into bed with her, but I fought off the urge and just gave her another kiss. "Will do."

Outside, light was just starting to break in the sky, a slow yellowing of the smog. The streets were almost silent at the early hour. It was hard not to be bitter about being up at this ungodly hungover time, but it was better than having to deal with the sewage backup if Chee hadn't called. I headed downtown and bought a bagel from a girly-faced guy who didn't know how to make change.

The bagel was wrapped in some kind of plastic film that dissolved when I put it in my mouth. It wasn't bad, but it ticked me off that bagel boy got confused with the change and needed me to go into his cash pouch and count out my own money.

It seems like I always end up bailing everyone out. Even dumb bagel guys. Maggie says I'm as compulsive as Chee. She would have just stood there and waited until bagel boy sorted it out, even if it took all day. But

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I have a damn hard time watching some trogwad drop dollars all over the sidewalk. Sometimes it's just easier to climb out of the oatmeal and do things yourself.

Chee was waiting for me when I got in, practically bouncing up and down. Five pumps down, now.

"It started with just one when I called you, but now there's five. They keep shutting off."

I went into the control room. The troubleshooting database was still down so I grabbed the hardcopy manuals again. Weird how the pumps were all going off-line like that. The control room, normally alive with the hum of the machines, was quieter with half of them down. Around the city, sewage lines were backing up as we failed to cycle waste into the treatment facilities and pump the treated water out into the river.

I thought about Nora with her rash, thanks to swimming in that gunk. It could really make you nervous. Looks clean, makes you rash. And we're at the bottom of the river. It's not just our crap in it. Everyone upstream, too. Our treatment plants pump water up from underground or pipe it in and treat it from lakes upstate. At least that's the theory. I don't really buy it; I've seen the amount of water we move through here and there's no way it's all coming from the lakes. In reality, we've got twenty-million-odd people all sucking water that we don't know where it's coming from or what's in it. Like I said, I drink bottled water even if I have to hike all over the city to find it. Or soda water. Or...tonic, even.

I closed my eyes, trying to piece the evening back together. All those empty canisters of tonic under the bar. Travis Alvarez saves the world while flying to the moon on Effy, and two rounds of sex yesterday.

Hell, yeah.

Chee and I brought the PressureDynes up one by one. All of them came back online except Pump Six. It was stubborn. We reprimed it. Fired. Reprimed. Nothing.

Suze came down to backseat drive, dragging Zoo, her secretary, behind her. Suze was completely strung out. Her blouse was half-tucked in, and she had big old fishy Effy eyes that were almost as red as the flashers on the console. But her fishy eyes narrowed when she saw all the flashers.

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"How come all these pumps went down? It's your job to keep them working."

I just looked at her. Zoned out of her mind at six A.M., romping around with her secretary girlfriend while she tried to crack the whip on the rest of us. Now that's leadership. Suddenly I thought that maybe I needed to get a different job. Or needed to start licking big piles of Effy before I came to work. Anything to take the edge off Suze.

"If you want me to fix it, I'll need you to clear out so I can concentrate."

Suze looked at me like she was chewing on a lemon. "You better get it fixed." She poked my chest with a thick finger. "If you don't, I'm making Chee your boss." She glanced at Zoo. "It's your turn on the couch. Come on." They trooped off.

Chee watched them go. He started picking at his head. "They never do any work," he said.

Another flasher went amber on the console. I flipped through the manual, hunting for a reason. "Who does? A job like this, where nobody gets fired?"

"Yeah, but there ought to be a way to get rid of her, at least. She moved all her home furniture into the office, the other day. She never goes home now. Says she likes the A/C here."

"You shouldn't complain. You're the guy who was throwing t.p. around yesterday."

He looked at me, puzzled. "So?"

I shrugged. "Never mind. Don't worry about Suze. We're the bottom of the pile, Chee. Get used to it. Let's try the reboot again."

It didn't work.

I went back to the manual. Sludge was probably coming up a hundred thousand toilets in the city by now. Weird how all the pumps shut down like that: one, two, three, four. I closed my eyes, thinking. Something about my Effy spree kept tickling the back of my head. Effy flashbacks, for sure. But they kept coming: big old eggs, big old silver eggs, all of them sucked dry by egg-slurping dinosaurs. Wow. That was some kind of weird spree. Nuns and stainless steel eggs. The urinals and Maggie...I blinked. Everything clicked. Pieces of the puzzle coming together. Cosmic Effy convergence: Emptied silver eggs. Max forgetting to restock his bar.

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I looked up at Chee, then down at the manuals, then back up at Chee. "How long have we been running these pumps?"

"What do you mean?"

"When did they get installed?"

Chee stared at the ceiling, picked his head thoughtfully. "Hell if I know. Before I came on, that's for sure."

"Me too. I've been here nine years. Have we got a computer that would tell us that? A receipt? Something?" I flipped to the front of the manual in my hands. "PressureDyne: Hi-Capacity, Self-Purging, Multi-Platform Pumping Engine. Model 13-44474-888." I frowned. "This manual was printed in 2020."

Chee whistled and leaned over to finger the plasticized pages. "That's pretty damn old."

"Built to last, right? People built things to last, back then."

"More than a hundred years?" He shrugged. "I had a car like that, once. Real solid. Engine hardly had any rust on it at all. And it had both headlights. But too damn old." He picked something out of his scalp and examined it for a second before flicking it onto the floor. "No one works on cars anymore. I can't remember the last time I saw a taxi running."

I looked at him, trying to decide if I wanted to say anything about flicking scalp on the floor, then just gave it up. I flipped through the manual some more until I found the part I wanted: "Individual Reporting Modules: Remote Access, Connectivity Features, and Data Collection." Following the manual's instructions, I opened a new set of diagnostic windows that bypassed the PressureDynes' generalized reports for pump station managers and instead connected directly with the pumps' raw log data. What I got was: "Host source data not found."

Big surprise.

The rest of the error text advised me to check the remote reporting module extension connectors, whatever those were. I closed the manual and tucked it under my arm. "Come on. I think I know what's wrong." I led Chee out of the control room and down into the bowels of the tunnels and plant system. The elevator was busted so we had to take the access stairs.

As we went deeper and deeper, darkness closed in. Grit and dust were everywhere. Rats skittered away from us. Isolated LEDs kept the stairwell visible, but barely. Dust and shadows and moving rats were all you could

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see in the dim amber. Eventually even the LEDs gave out. Chee found an emergency lantern in a wall socket, blanketed with gray fluffy dust, but it still had a charge. My asthma started to tickle and close in, sitting on my chest from all the crud in the air. I took a hit off my inhaler, and we kept going down. Finally, we hit bottom.

Light from Chee's lantern wavered and disappeared in the cavern's darkness. The metal of the PressureDynes glinted dimly. Chee sneezed. The motion sent his lantern rocking. Shadows shifted crazily until he used a hand to stop it. "You can't see shit down here," he muttered.

"Shut up. I'm thinking."

"I've never been down here."

"I came down, once. When I first came on. When Mercati was still alive."

"No wonder you act like him. He trained you?"

"Sure." I hunted around for the emergency lighting.

Mercati had shown the switches to me when he brought me down, nearly a decade before, and told me about the pumps. He'd been old then, but still working, and I liked the guy. He had a way of paying attention to things. Focused. Not like most people who can barely say hello to you before they start looking at their watch, or planning their party schedule, or complaining about their skin rashes. He used to say my teachers didn't know shit about algebra and that I should have stayed in school. Even knowing that he was just comparing me to Suze, I thought it was a pretty nice thing for him to say.

No one knew the pump systems as well as he did, so even after he got sick and I took over his job, I'd still sneak out to the hospital to ask him questions. He was my secret weapon until the cancer finally took out his guts.

I found the emergency lighting and pulled the switches. Fluorescent lights flickered, and came alive, buzzing. Some bulbs didn't come on, but there were enough.

Chee gasped. "They're huge."

A cathedral of engineering. Overhead, pipes arched through cavern dimness, shimmering under the muted light of the fluorescents, an interconnecting web of iron and shadows that centered in complex rosettes around the ranked loom of the pumps.

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They towered over us, gleaming dully, three stories tall, steel dinosaurs. Dust mantled them. Rust blossoms patterned their hides in complex overlays that made them look like they'd been draped in oriental rugs. Pentagonal bolts as big as my hands studded their armored plating and stitched together the vast sectioned pipes that spanned the darkness and shot down black tunnels in every compass direction, reaching for every neighborhood in the city. Moisture jewels gleamed and dripped from ancient joints. The pumps thrummed on. Perfectly designed. Forgotten by everyone in the city above. Beasts working without complaint, loyal despite abandonment.

Except that one of them had now gone silent.

I stifled an urge to get down on my knees and apologize for neglecting them, for betraying these loyal machines that had run for more than a century.

I went over to Pump Six's control panel, and stroked the dinosaur's vast belly where it loomed over me. The control panel was all covered with dust, but it glowed when I ran my hand over it. Amber signals and lime text glowing authoritatively, telling me just what was wrong, telling me and telling me, and never complaining that I hadn't been listening.

Raw data had stopped piping up to the control room at some point, and had instead sat in the dark, waiting for someone to come down and notice it. And the raw data was the answer to all my questions. At the top of the list: Model 13-44474-888, Requires Scheduled Maintenance. 946,080,000 cycles completed.

I ran through the pump diagnostics:

Valve Ring Part# 12-33939, Scheduled for Replacement.

Piston Parts# 232-2, 222-5, 222-6, 222-4-1, Scheduled for Replacement.

Displacement Catch Reservoir, Part# 37-37-375-77, Damaged, Replace.

Emergency Release Trigger Bearing, Part# 810-9, Damaged, Replace.

Valve Kit, Part# 437834-13, Damaged, Replace.

Master Drive Regulator, Part# 39-23-9834959-5, Damaged, Replace.

Priority Maintenance:

Compression Sensors, Part# 49-4, Part# 7777-302, Part# 403-74698

Primary Train, Part# 010303-0

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Gurney Belt Valve, Part# 9-0-2...

The list went on. I keyed into the maintenance history. The list opened up, running well into Mercati's tenure and even before, dozens of maintenance triggers and scheduled work requests, all of them blinking down here in the darkness, and ignored. Twenty-five years of neglect.

"Hey!" Chee called. "Check this out! They left magazines down here!"

I glanced over. He'd found a pile of trash someone had stuffed under one of the pumps. He was down on his hands and knees, reaching underneath, rooting things out: magazines, what looked like old food wrappers. I started to tell him to quit messing with stuff, but then I let it go. At least he wasn't breaking anything. I rubbed my eyes and went back to the pump diagnostics.

For the six years I'd been in charge, there were over a dozen errors displayed, but the PressureDynes had just kept going, chugging away as bits and pieces of them rattled away, and now, suddenly this one had given way completely, coming apart at the seams, loyally chugging until it just couldn't go on anymore and the maintenance backlog finally took the sucker down. I went over and started looking at the logs for the nine other pumps.

Every one of them was riddled with neglect: warning dumps, data logs full of error corrections, alarm triggers.

I went back to Pump Six and looked at its logs again. The men who'd built the machines had built them to last, but enough tiny little knives can still kill a big old dinosaur, and this one was beyond dead.

"We'll need to call PressureDyne," I said. "This thing is going to need more help than we can give it."

Chee looked up from a found magazine with a bright yellow car on the cover. "Do they even exist anymore?"

"They better." I grabbed the manual and looked up their customer support number.

It wasn't even in the same format as our numbers. Not a single letter of the alphabet in the whole damn thing.

Not only did PressureDyne not exist, they'd gone bankrupt more than forty years ago, victims of their overly well-designed pump products.

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They'd killed their own market. The only bright spot was that their technology had slouched into the public domain, and the net was up for once, so I could download schematics of the PressureDynes. There was a ton of information, except I didn't know anyone who could understand any of it. I sure couldn't.

I leaned back in my desk chair, staring at all that information I couldn't use. Like looking at Egyptian hieroglyphs. Something was there, but it sure beat me what I was supposed to do with it. I'd shifted the flows for Pump Six over to the rest of the pumps, and they were handling the new load, but it made me nervous thinking about all those maintenance warnings glowing down there in the dark: Mercury Extender Seal, Part# 5974-30, Damaged, Replace...whatever the hell that meant. I downloaded everything about the PressureDynes onto my phone bug, not sure who I'd take it to, but damn sure no one here was going to be able to help.

"What are you doing with that?"

I jumped and looked around. Suze had snuck up on me.

I shrugged. "Dunno. See if I can find someone to help, I guess."

"That's proprietary. You can't take those schematics out of here. Wipe it."

"You're crazy. It's public domain." I got up and popped my phone bug back into my ear. She made a swipe at it, but I dodged and headed for the doors.

She chased after me, a mean mountain of muscle. "I could fire you, you know!"

"Not if I quit first." I yanked open the control room door and ducked out.

"Hey! Get back here! I'm your boss." Her voice followed me down the corridor, getting fainter. "I'm in charge here, dammit. I can fire you! It's in the manual! I found it! You're not the only one who can read! I found it! I can fire you! I will!" Like a little kid, having a fit. She was still yelling when the control room doors finally shut her off.

Outside, in the sunshine, I ended up wandering in the park, watching the trogs, and wondering what I did to piss off God that he stuck me with a nutjob like Suze. I thought about calling Maggie to meet me, but I didn't feel like telling her about work—half the time when I tried to explain stuff

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to her, she just came up with bad ideas to fix it, or didn't think the things I was talking about were such a big deal — and if I called up halfway through the day she'd definitely wonder why I'd left so early, and what was going on, and then when I didn't take her advice about Suze she'd just get annoyed.

I kept passing trogs humping away and smiling. They waved at me to come over and play. I just waved back. One of them must have been a real girl, because she was distendedly obviously pregnant, bouncing away with a couple of her friends, and I was glad again that Maggie wasn't with me. She had enough pregnancy hang-ups without seeing the trogs breeding.

I wouldn't have minded throwing Suze to the trogs, though. She was about as dumb as one. Christ, I was surrounded by dummies. I needed a new job. Someplace that attracted better talent than sewage work did. I wondered how serious Suze had been about trying to fire me. If there really was something in the manuals that we'd all missed about hiring and firing. And then I wondered how serious I was about quitting. I sure hated Suze. But how did you get a better job when you hadn't finished high school, let alone college?

I stopped short. Sudden enlightenment: College. Columbia. They could help. They'd have some sharpie who could understand all the PressureDyne information. An engineering department, or something. They were even dependent on Pump Six. Talk about leverage.

I headed uptown on the subway with a whole pack of snarly pissed-off commuters, everyone scowling at each other and acting like you were stealing their territory if you sat down next to them. I ended up hanging from a strap and watching two old guys hiss at each other across the car until we broke down at 86th and we all ended up walking.

I kept passing clumps of trogs, lounging around on the sidewalks. A few of the really smart ones were panhandling, but most of them were just humping away. I would have been annoyed at having to shove through the orgy, if I wasn't actually feeling jealous. I kept wondering why the hell was I out here in the sweaty summer smog taking hits off my inhaler while Suze and Chee and Zoo were all hanging around in air-con comfort and basically doing nothing.

What was wrong with me? Why was I the one who always tried to fix things? Mercati had been like that, always taking stuff on and then just

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getting worked harder and harder until the cancer ate him from the inside out. He was working so hard at the end I think he might have been glad to go, just for the rest.

Maggie always said they worked me too hard, and as I dragged my ass up Broadway, I started thinking she was right. Then again, if I left things to Chee and Suze, I'd be swimming up the Broadway River in a stew of crap and chemicals instead of walking up a street. Maggie would have said that was someone else's problem, but she just thought so because when she flushed the toilet, it still worked. At the end of the day, it seemed like some people just got stuck dealing with the shit, and some people figured out how to have a good time.

A half-hour later, covered with sweat and street grime and holding a half-empty squirt bottle of rehydrating Sweatshine that I'd stolen from an unwary trog, I rolled through Columbia's gates and into the main quad, where I immediately ran into problems.

I kept following signs for the engineering building, but they kept sending me around in circles. I would have asked for directions — I'm not one of those guys who can't — but it's pretty damn embarrassing when you can't even follow a simple sign, so I held off.

And really, who was I going to ask? There were lots of kids out in the quad, all sprawled out and wearing basically nothing and looking like they were starting a trog colony of their own, but I didn't feel like talking to them. I'm not a prude, but you've got to draw the line somewhere.

I ended up wandering around lost, going from one building to the next, stumbling through a jumble of big old Roman- and Ben Franklin-style buildings: lots of columns and brick and patchy green quads — everything looking like it was about to start raining concrete any second — trying to figure out why I couldn't understand any of the signs.

Finally, I sucked it up and asked a couple half-naked kids for directions.

The thing that ticks me off about academic types is that they always act like they're smarter than you. Rich-kid, free-ride, prep-school ones are the worst. I kept asking the best and brightest for directions, trying to get them to take me to the engineering department, or the engineering building, or whatever the hell it was, and they all just looked me up and down and gibbered at me like monkeys, or else laughed through their Effy

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highs and kept on going. A couple of them gave me a shrug and a "dunno," but that was the best I got.

I gave up on directions, and just kept roaming. I don't know how long I wandered. Eventually I found a big old building off one of the quads, a big square thing with pillars like the Parthenon. A few kids were sprawled out on the steps, soaking up the sun, but it was one of the quietest parts of the campus I'd seen.

The first set of doors I tried was chained, and so was the second, but then I found a set where the chain had been left undone, two heavy lengths of it, dangling with an old open padlock on the end. The kids on the steps were ignoring me, so I yanked open the doors.

Inside, everything was silence and dust. Big old chandeliers hung down from the ceiling, sparkling with orangey light that filtered in through the dirt on the windows. The light made it feel like it was the end of day with the sun starting to set, even though it was only a little past noon. A heavy blanket of dust covered everything; floors and reading tables and chairs and computers all had a thick gray film over them.

"Hello?"

No one answered. My voice echoed and died, like the building had just swallowed up the sound. I started wandering, picking doorways at random: reading rooms, study carrels, more dead computers, but most of all, books. Aisles and aisles with racks full of them. Room after room stuffed with books, all of them covered with thick layers of dust.

A library. A whole damn library in the middle of a university, and not a single person in it. There were tracks on the floor, and a litter of Effy packets, condom wrappers, and liquor bottles where people had come and gone at some point, but even the trash had its own fine layer of dust.

In some rooms, all the books had been yanked off the shelves like a tornado had ripped through. In one, someone had made a bonfire out of them. They lay in a huge heap, completely torched, a pile of ash and pages and backings, a jumble of black ash fossils that crumbled to nothing when I crouched down and touched them. I stood quickly, wiping my hands on my pants. It was like fingering someone's bones.

I kept wandering, running my fingers along shelves and watching the dust cascade like miniature falls of concrete rain. I pulled down a book at random. More dust poured off and puffed up in my face. I coughed. My

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chest seized and I took a hit off my inhaler. In the dimness, I could barely make out the title: "Post-Liberation America. A Modern Perspective." When I opened it, its spine cracked.

"What are you doing here?"

I jumped back and dropped the book. Dust puffed around me. An old lady, hunched and witchy, was standing at the end of the aisle. She limped forward. Her voice was sharp as she repeated herself. "What are you doing here?"

"I got lost. I'm trying to find the engineering department."

She was an ugly old dame: Liver spots and lines all over her face. Her skin hung off her bones in loose flaps. She looked a thousand years old, and not in a smart wise way, just in a wrecked moth-eaten way. She had something flat and silvery in her hand. A pistol.

I took another step back.

She raised the gun. "Not that way. Out the way you came." She motioned with the pistol. "Off you go."

I hesitated.

She smiled slightly, showing stumps of missing teeth. "I won't shoot if you don't give me a reason." She waved the gun again. "Go on. You aren't supposed to be here." She herded me back through the library to the main doors with a brisk authority. She pulled them open and waved her pistol at me. "Go on. Get."

"Wait. Please. Can't you at least tell me where the engineering department is?"

"Closed down years ago. Now get out."

"There's got to be one!"

"Not anymore. Go on. Get." She brandished the pistol again. "Get."

I held onto the door. "But you must know someone who can help me." I was talking fast, trying to get all my words out before she used the gun. "I work on the city's sewage pumps. They're breaking, and I don't know how to fix them. I need someone who has engineering experience."

She was shaking her head and starting to wave the gun. I tried again. "Please! You've got to help. No one will talk to me, and you're going to be swimming in crap if I don't find help. Pump Six serves the university and *I don't know how to fix it!*"

She paused. She cocked her head first one way, then the other. "Go on."

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I briefly outlined the problems with the PressureDynes. When I finished, she shook her head and turned away. "You've wasted your time. We haven't had an engineering department in over twenty years." She went over to a reading table and took a couple swipes at its dust. Pulled out a chair and did the same with it. She sat, placing her pistol on the table, and motioned me to join her.

Warily, I brushed off my own seat. She laughed at the way my eyes kept going to her pistol. She picked it up and tucked it into a pocket of her moth-eaten sweater. "Don't worry. I won't shoot you now. I just keep it around in case the kids get belligerent. They don't very often, anymore, but you never know...." Her voice trailed off, as she looked out at the quad.

"How can you not have an engineering department?"

Her eyes swung back to me. "Same reason I closed the library." She laughed. "We can't have the students running around in here, can we?" She considered me for a moment, thoughtful. "I'm surprised you got in. I'm must be getting old, forgetting to lock up like that."

"You always lock it? Aren't you librarians — "

"I'm not a librarian," she interrupted. "We haven't had a librarian since Herman Hsu died." She laughed. "I'm just an old faculty wife. My husband taught organic chemistry before he died."

"But you're the one who put the chains on the doors?"

"There wasn't anyone else to do it. I just saw the students partying in here and realized something had to be done before they burned the damn place down." She drummed her fingers on the table, raising little dust puffs with her boney digits as she considered me. Finally she said, "If I gave you the library keys, could you learn the things you need to know? About these pumps? Learn how they work? Fix them, maybe?"

"I doubt it. That's why I came here." I pulled out my earbug. "I've got the schematics right here. I just need someone to go over them for me."

"There's no one here who can help you." She smiled tightly. "My degree was in social psychology, not engineering. And really, there's no one else. Unless you count them." She waved at the students beyond the windows, humping in the quad. "Do you think that any of them could read your schematics?"

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Through the smudged glass doors I could see the kids on the library steps, stripped down completely. They were humping away, grinning and having a good time. One of the girls saw me through the glass and waved at me to join her. When I shook my head, she shrugged and went back to her humping.

The old lady studied me like a vulture. "See what I mean?"

The girl got into her rhythm. She grinned at me watching, and motioned again for me to come out and play. All she needed were some big yellow eyes, and she would have made a perfect trog.

I closed my eyes and opened them again. Nothing changed. The girl was still there with all of her little play friends. All of them romping around and having a good time.

"The best and the brightest," the old lady murmured.

In the middle of the quad, more of the students were stripping down, none of them caring that they were doing it in the middle of broad daylight, none of them worried about who was watching, or what anyone might think. A couple hundred kids, and not a single one of them had a book, or a notebook, or pens, or paper, or a computer with them.

The old lady laughed. "Don't look so surprised. You can't say someone of your caliber never noticed." She paused, waiting, then peered at me, incredulous. "The trogs? The concrete rain? The reproductive disorders? You never wondered about any of it?" She shook her head. "You're stupider than I guessed."

"But...." I cleared my throat. "How could it...I mean...." I trailed off.

"Chemistry was my husband's field." She squinted at the kids humping on the steps and tangled out in the grass, then shook her head and shrugged. "There are plenty of books on the topic. For a while there were even magazine stories about it. 'Why breast might not be best.' Stuff like that. " She waved a hand impatiently. "Rohit and I never really thought about any of it until his students started seeming stupider every year." She cackled briefly. "And then he tested them, and he was right."

"We can't all be turning into trogs." I held up my bottle of Sweatshine. "How could I buy this bottle, or my earbug, or bacon, or anything? Someone has to be making these things."

"You found bacon? Where?" She leaned forward, interested.

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"My wife did. Last packet."

She settled back with a sigh. "It doesn't matter. I couldn't chew it anyway." She studied my Sweatshine bottle. "Who knows? Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not so bad. But this is the longest conversation that I've had since Rohit died; most people just don't seem to be able to pay attention to things like they used to." She eyed me. "Maybe your Sweatshine bottle just means there's a factory somewhere that's as good as your sewage pumps used to be. And as long as nothing too complex goes wrong, we all get to keep drinking it."

"It's not that bad."

"Maybe not." She shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me, anymore. I'll kick off pretty soon. After that, it's your problem."

IT WAS NIGHT by the time I came out of the university. I had a bag full of books, and no one to know that I'd taken them. The old lady hadn't cared if I checked them out or not, just waved at me to take as many as I liked, and then gave me the keys and told me to lock up when I left.

All of the books were thick with equations and diagrams. I'd picked through them one after another, reading each for a while, before giving up and starting on another. They were all pretty much gibberish. It was like trying to read before you knew your ABCs. Mercati had been right. I should have stayed in school. I probably wouldn't have done any worse than the Columbia kids.

Out on the street, half the buildings were dark. Some kind of brownout that ran all the way down Broadway. One side of the street had electricity, cheerful and bright. The other side had candles glimmering in all the apartment windows, ghost lights flickering in a pretty ambiance.

A crash of concrete rain echoed from a couple blocks away. I couldn't help shivering. Everything had turned creepy. It felt like the old lady was leaning over my shoulder and pointing out broken things everywhere. Empty autovendors. Cars that hadn't moved in years. Cracks in the sidewalk. Piss in the gutters.

What was normal supposed to look like?

I forced myself to look at good things. People were still out and about,

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walking to their dance clubs, going out to eat, wandering uptown or downtown to see their parents. Kids were on skateboards rolling past and trogs were humping in the alleys. A couple of vendor boxes were full of cellophane bagels, along with a big row of Sweatshine bottles all glowing green under their lights, still all stocked up and ready for sale. Lots of things were still working. Wicky was still a great club, even if Max needed a little help remembering to restock. And Miku and Gabe had their new baby, even if it took them three years to get it. I couldn't let myself wonder if that baby was going to turn out like the college kids in the quad. Not everything was broken.

As if to prove it, the subway ran all the way to my stop for a change. Somewhere on the line, they must have had a couple guys like me, people who could still read a schematic and remember how to show up for work and not throw toilet paper around the control rooms. I wondered who they were. And then I wondered if they ever noticed how hard it was to get anything done.

When I got home, Maggie was already in bed. I gave her a kiss and she woke up a little. She pushed her hair away from her face. "I left out a hotpack burrito for you. The stove's still broke."

"Sorry. I forgot. I'll fix it now."

"No worry." She turned away from me and pulled the sheets up around her neck. For a minute, I thought she'd dozed off, but then she said, "Trav?"

"Yeah?"

"I got my period."

I sat down beside her and started massaging her back. "How you doing with that?"

"S'okay. Maybe next time." She was already dropping back to sleep. "You just got to stay optimistic, right?"

"That's right, baby." I kept rubbing her back. "That's right."

When she was asleep, I went back to the kitchen. I found the hotpack burrito and shook it and tore it open, holding it with the tips of my fingers so I wouldn't burn myself. I took a bite, and decided the burritos were still working just fine. I dumped all the books onto the kitchen table and stared at them, trying to decide where to start.

Through the open kitchen windows, from the direction of the park,

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I heard another crash of concrete rain. I looked out toward the candleflicker darkness. Not far away, deep underground, nine pumps were chugging away; their little flashers winking in and out with errors, their maintenance logs scrolling repair requests, and all of them running a little harder now that Pump Six was down. But they were still running. The people who'd built them had done a good job. With luck, they'd keep running for a long time yet.

I chose a book at random and started reading.

"If you recall, I did say there might be side effects."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

You Call This the Future? by Nick Sagan, Mark Frary, and Andy Walker, Chicago Review Press, 2008, $14.95.

WHEN I WAS a kid, magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* and comic strips like *Dick Tracy* were forever giving us glimpses into the future. Even on pulp paper and newsprint, the images were enough to fire the imagination of any kid. And then there were the pulp magazines where science fiction writers tossed out inventions the way Bill Gates makes money.

In the fifties and early sixties we were pretty much pre-everything — at least it feels like that these days, when you consider the gadgets currently available. Back then, the writers' descriptions and the artists' renditions of what the future held for us were windows into this amazing, shiny future that we couldn't wait to reach. Jetpacks! Flying cars! Wristwatch TV sets! Androids and robots! Floating walkways! Bubble houses!

Of course, we didn't get most of it — at least we haven't yet. If you want to be cynical, nothing seems to really take off unless the porn industry gets behind it. Their backing certainly fueled the presence of video machines in most homes, and later, brought in the computer with its Internet access.

But I digress.

In the manner of one of those "Whatever happened to..." articles that run from time to time in periodicals like *People Magazine*, Nick Sagan and his fellow authors tell us in their book *You Call This the Future?* what happened to these imagined and promised inventions. Or rather why we didn't get them, and what we did.

You don't need to have grown up with *Popular Mechanics* to appreciate what they've done. Half the things they discuss were never speculated about in those venerable

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pages. For instance, nobody back then was thinking about wireless access points because they didn't even imagine the Internet with its email, blogs, downloads, and all.

What you do need to appreciate *You Call This the Future*? is an inquiring mind that likes to be fed information.

The book's laid out in illustrated chapters ranging from jetpacks to cryonics and all points in between. The prose is smart, but not jargon-heavy. The illustrations and layout design facilitate our understanding of the prose, rather than distract. And the ideas — both the ones that still live in our imagination, and the ones that have already been brought to life — remain as intriguing as the ones this kid daydreamed about in the pages of the pulps and *Popular Mechanics*.

Echo, by Terry Moore, Abstract Studio, 2008, serial, $3.50 an issue.

I've written about Terry Moore's previous serial *Strangers in Paradise* a few times in other installments of this column, for all that it only banged up against the walls of our genre, rather than ever taking up actual residence inside. I could spend a couple of columns talking about the many good things this long, extended story brought to the table, one of which is that it actually ends.

It has a start, a long (and occasionally muddled) middle, and a very satisfying conclusion, and you can pick the whole thing up now in six fat trade paperbacks the size of regular paperbacks, rather than that more awkward size of a comic book that's not as easy to shelve in your bookcase. They should be available in any good bookstore, or you can check out *www.strangersinparadise.com* for more information.

But the new project *Echo* (two issues in as I write this) is definitely contemporary science fiction, to which Moore brings all the strengths that made *Strangers in Paradise* such a delight.

It opens with a government agency testing a flight suit (a literal flight suit, complete with jetpack) in a desert area when they kill the "pilot" as the last part of the test. There's an explosion, followed by a rainfall of tiny pellets (which is all that's left of the suit). In the testing area, a photographer named Julie gets caught in the "rainfall" of pellets. They coalesce on her skin, forming a portion of the flight suit on her chest that won't come off.

The agency is trying to gather

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up all evidence of the test, including any bystanders. They know Julie was there, and also an unidentified man (whom we haven't met yet), so they call in an assassin to assist with the cleanup.

This being Moore, we don't just get a linear story, and things aren't as simple or clear-cut as they seem. For instance, we meet the assassin before we realize that's what she is. In her first scene she's just a young woman playing with her child in an idyllic country setting — until she gets called in to work.

Moore has a great gift for characterization. Through his expressive artwork and spot-on dialogue, we quickly know and find depth to all the characters. And we also know that there'll be great interaction between them. No one is safe in a Moore story, either, a fact that's brought home when the viewpoint character from the opening pages dies a third of the way into the first issue.

If you haven't tried Moore before, now's the time to get in on the ground floor of what promises to be an amazing series. Sure, issues will get reprinted down the road in trade editions, but there's an extra zing reading this sort of a story in a serial fashion. Your local comic shop should have back issues readily available to help you catch up, or check that *Strangers in Paradise* site I mentioned earlier.

Echo isn't being treated like an event the way the big comic companies promote what they consider to be their big stories, or hot series, but I have no doubt that in its own quiet way, it will prove to be the most satisfying story to come out this year.

The Born Queen, by Greg Keyes, Del Rey, 2008, $26.

I'm always amused how, with a series such as Keyes's *The Kingdom of Thorn and Bone*, the author and his publishers expect readers to retain the details of the many characters and subplots of the books, for all that there's usually a year or more between installments. Even TV shows have a little "last week on..." clip to bring one up to date, and they come out on a weekly basis, rather than annually.

Maybe I just have a bad memory. Or maybe they're so close to the material that it's all still current for them. I don't know. But I do know that it's the mark of a good writer when their latest installment keeps your interest, even when your memory is scrambling

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— and not always successfully — to fill in the blanks.

The Kingdom of Thorn and Bone is a big, sprawling story with more characters and plot threads than I could possibly sum up efficiently in the space I have. And this being the fourth and last book, my trying to do so will only spoil it for readers who have been happily reading it as each book comes out, as well as for readers who decide to give the series a try for the first time.

So let me simply restate what I said in reviews of previous installments of this column: what makes this series so satisfying is how it reclaims the sense of wonder that first attracted many of us to reading fantasy in the first place. Yes, the plotting is deft and surprising, the characters fully realized, the world fascinating. But you can say that about a lot of books. What too many of them lack, however, is that feeling of wonder. The sense that the world is a bigger, more mysterious, and stranger place than we usually take it to be.

The Born Queen is an utterly fascinating conclusion to a superb series. You might not like the fates of all the characters, you'll certainly be very surprised at the choices some of them make, but you won't feel cheated for a moment. This is big storytelling that takes the time to give us a little more than just the salient details. I also really liked how Keyes finishes with an epilogue that gives us a glimpse at a few of the key characters many years after the conclusion of the story.

If you only read one recently published fantasy series, let it be this one.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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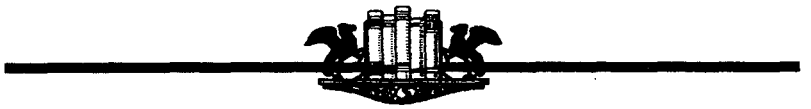

BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Invention of Everything Else, by Samantha Hunt, Houghton Mifflin, 2008, $24.

Sway, by Zachary Lazar, Little, Brown, 2008, $23.99.

"Discontinuity Girl"

TIME TRAVEL is so stressful. For starters, you have to keep track of blackout dates. No Hawaiian vacations in late 1941; forget about London during autumn 1666; and unless your plague vaccinations are up to date, the entire 14th century is out. Once you reach your destination, there's so much to remember. Don't step on any wildlife. Don't kill your grandfather. Don't sleep with your grandmother. Packing is a nightmare — what do you bring for the Later Cretaceous? Were bustles in or out in 1873?

And don't even think about bringing back any souvenirs.

On the page, of course, time travel has its rewards, in particular for writers. Historical research itself is a form of time travel. Total immersion in the books and ephemera of a period; visiting sites where major events occurred or interesting people lived; fingering the clothing and everyday objects of another time — this kind of work is magical, intoxicating. When done well, it results in alternate timelines that challenge us to reexamine the history of our own world: books like Bruce Sterling's and William Gibson's *The Difference Engine*; James Morrow's *The Last Witchfinder*; Lisa Goldstein's *The Dream Years*; John Crowley's Aegypt sequence and *The Evening Land*; Christopher Priest's superb, minatory *The Prestige* and *The Separations*. Time travel and alternate history work especially well as fictional or cinematic early-warning systems, sounding the tocsin for human hubris (and stupidity) and technological peril: witness H. G. Wells's

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The Time Machine; Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder"; Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*; Chris Marker's influential short film *La Jetée* and its homage, Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys*. In a more personal vein, temporal adjustment allows us to indulge all our best and worst what-if scenarios, as in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol;" Jack Finney's "The Third Level" and *Time And Again*; Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*; *Groundhog Day* and the Back to the Future franchise, among myriad others. *The Invention of Everything Else*, Samantha Hunt's disappointing new novel, juggles many of these elements — time-out-of-joint romance; fascinating historical figures; a homemade time machine — and manages to drop every single one of them.

Its quirky setup sounds appealing enough. In 1943 Manhattan, Louisa, a young chambermaid at the Hotel New Yorker, meets the eighty-six-year-old Nikola Tesla, the hotel's longterm and impecunious resident oddball, and the two bond over a shared affection for homing pigeons. If he were around today, the Serbian-born Tesla would totally make it to the final cut on World's Top Genius Inventor. His theories contributed to the development of modern electricity, radio, magnetic induction, X-ray machines, tasers, and spark plugs, to name a few. He also anticipated a means of displaying brain imagery (not unlike PET scans and their more recent iterations); a remote-operated, fuelless aircraft; and a no-nonsense, euphemism-free method of mass destruction termed "the death ray." (You might want to vote Tesla off the island, but then there'd be no island.)

Despite patenting various inventions, Tesla was tragically done in by a devastating combination of hubris and naiveté and good old-fashioned bad luck. After immigrating to the U.S. (he became a citizen in 1891), he worked for Thomas Edison, who fought to deliver electricity by means of direct current (DC) rather than by Tesla's alternating current (AC). Edison famously screwed Tesla out of a huge bonus he'd been promised, an incident Hunt covers in her novel. The notorious "War of the Currents" between Edison and Westinghouse/Tesla is only referred to *en passant* in *The Invention of Everything Else* — just as well, since it's a central theme in Priest's far superior *The Prestige*. If history is written by the winners, the also-rans often get the

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better roles in fiction — in addition to Priest's novel, Tesla has also made appearances in books by Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon, among others.

Hunt's Tesla is a melancholy, dreamy old man who talks to pigeons. His room at the Hotel New Yorker is a "sort of curiosity cabinet, a mad scientist's dollhouse" filled with electrical coils, notebooks, magnets, clothing from the old country. It's catnip for Louisa, a prying chambermaid who likes to rifle suitcases and bureau drawers but doesn't steal anything. Louisa lives alone with her widowed father, Walter, the night watchman at the 42nd Street branch of the New York Public Library. On the morning of the same day she first encounters Tesla, she meets a young man named Arthur, who claims to be a long-forgotten schoolmate; he wins Louisa's affection by fondly recalling her childhood fascination with homing pigeons. Later that same week (the novel's main action begins on New Year's Day and ends on January 7, the day of Tesla's death), Louisa, Walter, and Arthur discover that Walter's childhood friend Azor, missing and presumed dead for several years, is in fact alive.

Azor claims to have invented a time machine. This was a relief to me, because an alarming number of minor but annoying anachronisms in the book's opening chapters made me grind my teeth over what seemed to be egregiously sloppy efforts on the author's part to evoke another time. To whit: references to "polyester slips" in 1943. Polyester wasn't in common use as a fabric in the U.S. till the early 1950s, and Louisa would certainly have assumed a petticoat was made of nylon or silk. Another passing reference to foam rubber in the late 1800s (it wasn't developed until 1936). Workers in Edison's office in 1884 use Royal typewriters, but the Royal company wasn't established until 1906. A 1943 hotel worker refers to a power outage as being caused by a "power surge," a phrase that (while historically possible) sounds blaringly wrong for its period.

Okay, I thought, it's an alternate history — all those things are in there on purpose.

But no alternate history is truly developed in *The Invention of Everything Else*, no rationale given for Royal typewriters making an appearance twenty-odd years before they were invented (Tesla did theorize a voice-activated typewriter, but if that's mentioned in Hunt's book, I missed it). Instead of a carefully

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constructed alternate world, Hunt gives us a clumsily executed *deus ex machina*, Azor's homemade time machine, which functions primarily to shuttle Walter back to see Freddie, his beloved dead wife, but kills him in the process, a death that conveniently takes place offstage. Maybe the machine also brought Arthur from the future to hook up with Louisa, and maybe Tesla used it to dodge his own death. But I'm still not sure of those plot elements. I'm not sure how it works, either — it seems to be made of scrap metal and hope — or why it kills Walter. I am sure that the "Sam" who befriends Tesla is Samuel Clemens, who as Mark Twain wrote a famous time travel book, and really was friends with Tesla; but I'm not sure what he's doing in this story, except wandering around in period dress to provide some commentary that is supposed to be ironic. The same goes for Robert Underwood Johnson, the real-life editor of *The Century* magazine, and his wife, Katherine, who were also friends of the scientist but appear to be here as historical window-dressing. Hunt's Tesla is supposed to be in love with Katherine, but his passion registers as little more than a schoolboy crush on his best friend's wife. Where's that death ray when you need it?

More troublesome even than the bungled time travel element is Hunt's fuzzy characterizations. Both Arthur and Tesla are described as vampiric in appearance. But as neither is a vampire, and I don't think that Arthur and Tesla are intended to be related, or the same person (which could happen in a time loop), the use of the word "vampire" seems like sloppy descriptive shorthand for dark, vaguely mysterious men. Ditto the reference to Louisa's Hell's Kitchen home as seeming "small and warm as a doll's", echoing the earlier description of Tesla's hotel room. And Hunt simply resorts to cliché when it comes to the Hotel New Yorker: "The hotel is a gentle monster, a sleeping giant that endures the constant bustle of so many guests. Everywhere art-deco designs make the eyeballs pop."

These saggy descriptions are especially frustrating, since Hunt is capable of producing a fine passage, such as this one:

> As Louisa walks home from the subway, she counts the gas lamps that once lit the sidewalks outside people's homes. The sun is setting.

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Years ago, before she was born, it would have been time for the lamplighter to start his evening's work. Wiry men who walked the streets of New York stopping at each cast-iron lamp and, by swinging one foot up onto the base, grabbing hold of the cross handle just below the glass chimney, and hanging suspended there in that position, they'd light the lamp. Now most of the lamps have been replaced by electrical ones or removed altogether, leaving behind a circle of fresh cement to fill in the hole. Walter would sometimes still demonstrate the lamplighter's swing. He'd get a faraway look in his eyes, Antarctica far, before both the wars, before he even met Freddie, so far that Louisa could imagine her father as a child, the excitement he must have felt peeking out from behind a bedroom curtain in the home where he grew up, waiting and watching for the lamplighter to make his way down the block as if every day were Christmas somehow.

Time travel stories depend in large part upon a wistful evocation of what might have been; but this sense of a lost opportunity should not apply to the novel itself. Hunt's entire book suffers from a weird diffusion of affect and effect, as though the author couldn't decide where to place its narrative weight. Wistful love story, like *Time and Again*? Historical panorama, à la E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*? Clever use of the eccentric Tesla, as in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*?

This uncertainty, a kind of blurred literary double vision, is the central problem with *The Invention of Everything Else*. Historical fiction lives and dies by verisimilitude: get one detail wrong and you have the kind of detail that yanks you from the page or screen back to the very present you're presumably trying to escape from. Think of the Roman soldiers sporting wristwatches in Spartacus. A forgivable gaffe in a masterpiece, maybe, but still. Hunt has Walter and Azor as boys singing "Yankee Doodle Dandy," a song they would surely have known by its correct title, "Yankee Doodle Boy." Historical accuracy may not be everything, but it's something. The error appears sloppy.

Speaking of his time machine, Azor remarks, "You'd be surprised. You can build almost anything if

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you have two years, an empty airport, and a pile of *Popular Mechanics*." It's an amusing observation, but it doesn't hold true for writing a novel, especially one as ambitious as *The Invention of Everything Else*. You need flesh-and-blood characters, narrative drive, a sense of history and landscape that transcends what you can find online by entering "Nikola Tesla" and "1943 New York." That stack of *Popular Mechanics* will only get you so far.

Lucifer Rising

Sway, Zachary Lazar's terse and haunting second novel, also draws on historical persons and events, with much greater success — an achievement all the more remarkable when one considers the familiarity of its source material, the still fertile burying ground of the late 1960s. The narrative relies less on coincidence than on a confluence between the Manson Family, the Rolling Stones, and the experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger. The pattern of connections between its central characters — Anger; Brian Jones; Anita Pallenberg; Charles Manson; and Bobby Beausoleil — might be drawn as a pentacle, a fitting symbol since all these figures dabbled to varying degrees in the occult. Manson and the Rolling Stones entourage (in their Satanic Majesties mode) have spent the decades since 1970 as poster boys for the forces of black light. Anger's films, especially his so-called Magick Lantern Cycle, have a potent if drippy gloss of do-it-yourself occultism and so-bad-it's-good-for-you sex. They look silly and amateurish now, and give a good idea of the results of a dream collaboration between Ed Wood and Terence McKenna. But they looked silly and amateurish then, too, and Anger's potent blend of arthouse pretention and grindhouse imagery has had a powerful influence on film and video artists such as Matthew Barney and the late Derek Jarman.

Which leaves Bobby Beausoleil, perhaps the least-known of Sway's protagonists. A handsome, aimless rock star manqué, Beausoleil was a lunatic fringe figure who, like the Warhol Factory's Valerie Solanas, had a flickering encounter with celloloid fame when he appeared in Anger's short "Invocation of My Demon Brother," a movie that also featured the Rolling Stones. By the time the film debuted, Beausoleil had gained far greater notoriety for his part in the Manson Family murders — he killed a friend, then

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used the victim's blood to scrawl POLITICAL PIGGY on a wall beside the crime scene.

Lazar depicts murder, the Stones' music, and Anger's filmmaking process with the same measured detachment. This understatement works better at evoking the vertiginous freefall of those days than the exultant, overripe prose the period too often evokes from writers who lived through it. (It probably helps that Lazar is too young to have experienced the era firsthand.) At 250 pages, *Sway* provides a capsule history of the music and dark aesthetic that comprised the fag-end of the 1960s. There's the poisonous seepage of political into personal violence, demonstrated in Brian Jones's vicious beatings of his girlfriend, Anita Pallenberg; the collusion of art, drugs, and the occult in Anger's movies and the Stones' music; the fatal combination of naivieté and refusal that culminated in the black spectacle that was the Stones' performance at Altamont, famously depicted in *Gimme Shelter*, a film that was neither elegy nor celebration of sixties' excess, but indictment.

But in *Sway*, the same event is presented as ritual, though not the demonic fever dreams of George R.R. Martin's *The Armgaddon Rag* or Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*. Instead, in Lazar's more subdued vision, Anger's film inadvertently summons into being our own damaged world.

> "I'd like this to just be the first part," Anger said.
>
> Mick [Jagger] was still looking at the flickering white blank on the wall. He hadn't moved since the film ended, and it was only now that Anger realized how disturbing it was. He'd made it up of some leftover scraps he had of Bobby in San Francisco; some scraps of the band in Hyde Park, the Hells Angels in front of the stage; some scraps of himself — all pieced together like the shards of an explosion. It was not the vision of light he'd started out making three years ago, but the vision of what he'd seen in those three years, all of it he'd manage to preserve on film.
>
> "It's not what we talked about, I know," [Anger] said. "This is just the chaos part, the prologue. It's just the beginning."

The beginning was the end: the transcendent instauration that so

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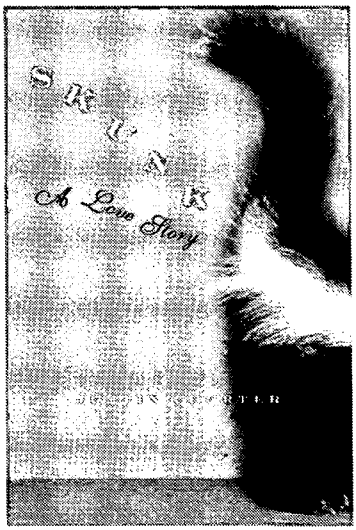

"...like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, the Incredible Hulk, Frankenstein's monster, and other of his fictional forbears [Damien is] at once repellent and sympathetic."
— *Bostonia*

"Thoreau meets Timothy Leary in this outrageous and cautionary tale." — Brian Evenson

"This is fine, fierce writing."
— Laird Hunt

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many hippies and artists and ordinary people hoped would occur never did. "Everything is falling apart right now," Anger goes on to tell Jagger. "That's what we know. This revolution or whatever they're calling it, it's really happening. Whether it's only chaos, or if it leads to something better, we don't know yet. That's why I want to make the next film. I don't think it has to be only chaos."

But it was only chaos, the prolonged aftermath of disintegration and slow extinction in which we're still living. *Sway*'s title refers to the power one person holds over another; it also name-checks the Rolling Stones song, "Sway," and may more obliquely reference the motion of a pendulum as it moves between two points: death and life; darkness and light; then and now. "There is no more Lucifer now," Lazar observes near the end of this fine, eerie novel, "no more Prince of Darkness, no more Angel of Light. There is a return to what was always there before, the silence."

Kenneth Anger's next film was *Lucifer Rising*. Its music was composed and recorded by Bobby Beausoleil while he was serving a death sentence for his part in the

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Manson family murders, a sentence that has since been commuted to life imprisonment. As of this writing, Anger is still alive. His films, including Mick Jagger's soundtrack for "Invocation of My Demon Brother" and Bobby Beausoleil's for "Lucifer Rising," can be accessed through UbuWeb's online archive of the avant garde, *UbuWeb.com*.

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Laura Kasischke is probably best known for her novel The Life Before Her Eyes, *a film version of which was recently released (starring Evan Rachel Wood and Uma Thurman). Her other novels include* White Bird in a Blizzard, Suspicious River *(which was also adapted for film),* Be Mine, *and,* Boy Crazy. *She lives in Michigan, where she teaches writing. Her* F&SF *debut is a dark and unsettling tale.*

Search Continues for Elderly Man

By Laura Kasischke

THERE WAS A CHILD ON THE porch, a boy. He had a dog on a leash. The boy and the dog looked up at me. The boy was smiling. The dog was panting as if it had been running. I said, "Yes?"

"Mr. Rentz?"

"Yes?" I said.

"Don't you remember us?" the boy asked.

Behind him, a tractor rumbled by on the gravel road. A cloud of dust rose behind the tractor. A young farmer in a white T-shirt took one hand off the wheel and waved. I lifted my hand to wave back, but the farmer had only glanced in my direction for a second, less than a second, before rumbling away.

"*What?*" I said, leaning down to the boy.

Of course, I'd heard what he'd said, my hearing was perfect, but I'd already forgotten what it was I'd heard. The dog — some kind of terrier — had begun to wag its tail, whining excitedly on its leash, as if it were anticipating something from me, as if it expected me to open the door.

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"I just asked," the boy said, looking a bit amused, "if you remembered us."

"Oh," I said.

Behind the boy, on the other side of the gravel road, there was a young girl running bare legged, leaping through the field. She had a handful of clover, or something blurred and purple, and she was shrieking. I watched her for a few moments, and then, as if she'd slipped into a hole in the earth, both she and her shrieks were gone.

I looked back down at the boy and his dog. *Yes*, I thought, there was certainly something familiar here. The boy's chipped front tooth. But also that dog.

"We were in the neighborhood," the boy said, "and we remembered your house, and wondered if you wanted to come out, if you could come out and play."

I snorted a little, of course. *Come out and play.* I supposed this was supposed to bring it all back — those childhood years, those carefree summer days! I supposed this boy was supposed to be some hallucinated version of me. I supposed that dog was supposed to be my dog, way back when, and here was Death at my door, beckoning me outside "to play," and I was supposed to step out there and follow the boy into the field, and maybe later he'd get me to take his hand, and we'd find ourselves back at my mother's table with a big ham at the center and all my dead relatives would be shiny-eyed and happy to see me, and in a startling epiphanic moment of ambivalence and ecstasy I'd suddenly understand that the boy, who was me, was dead. But I'd never had a dog.

And my mother had packed me up by the age of four and sent me to live with Aunt Elizabeth, who was an all-out drunk. The kind of drunk who'd manage to get dinner on the table every few nights, and then would stumble into the table and knock it all onto the floor, then chase me and that girl, Francine, and that other orphan, whose name I'm not sure I ever even knew, around with a broken bottle screaming that she was going to kill us all. When Uncle Ernest would get home, he'd sock her in the mouth, and we'd all go salvage whatever we could from the floor for supper. If there was ever a dog, it would have run off.

"I'm busy," I said to the boy, and the dog sat down then, as if on cue, on its haunches. The boy narrowed his eyes. Yes, there was certainly

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something sinister about the kid. Anyone could see that, even a confused old man. I knew right away that he wouldn't be taking no for an answer.

"That's too bad," the boy said. His voice was lower this time around. Overhead, a plane came barreling out of a cloud, crashing in only seconds somewhere over the horizon, never making a sound. He hooked a thumb over his belt buckle as if he might yank his pants down. As if he was planning to take a piss or a shit right there on my stoop. The little dog curled his lip a bit, like he was thinking about growling.

"Now, look," I said. "I do know you. I know all about you, and you can stand out here on my stoop all day and do whatever foul thing you can think up to do, but I'm not coming out..." and then I added, sarcastically, "*to play*," so he'd know I wasn't quite the sentimental old doddering fool he'd taken me for.

He frowned. And then he shrugged. He started to turn around. "Fine," he said. "Have it your way."

He headed back down the steps. The dog turned to follow him.

I couldn't help it. I'd been expecting trouble. All my life, there it had been, every time I opened the god-damned door. First Aunt Elizabeth, of course. And then the disastrous marriage. Anne with hands like claws within two years of the honeymoon, twisted up like a crabapple tree in the rollaway bed, the whole house smelling of death, and still a hundred chores dawn to dusk to be done. And the children. A limb now and then. A shovel brought down accidentally on some neighbor kid's head. "You just wait a minute, you little bastard," I said.

He turned around, slowly, and this time he had a whole new face. The face of an angel! His voice was as sweet as a girl's. The dog had cocked its head sweetly. And then it vanished. Just a blank space on a limp leash. The angel said, "Yes, Mr. Rentz? *Yes*?"

It was hard not to give right in. But I knew what this was about. I hadn't avoided this encounter for eighty years just to walk straight into its boobytrap now. I hadn't forgotten the way Duke and Erma had signed over that insurance policy to their son just before the thing in the ravine. Duke with his foot in a coyote trap and a plastic bag over his face. Erma — and them making it look like a rape, but nobody would have raped poor crippled Erma. The devil, maybe.

No. Not even the devil.

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I took a step backward. I raised up both fists. I said, "I know you know I can fight. I know you've fought me before. And you remember what happened then."

"Oh, Mr. Rentz." He said it as if he were tired of this particular fight. *Yes, yes, yes.* Those nurses with their pockets full of pills. Those prostitutes down on Division Avenue, tapping on the window of your car. I'd fallen for this once or twice, but whoever that poor fellow was, I was not him anymore. The farmer on the tractor came chugging by again, but he came from the same direction he'd come the last time. They couldn't even get this part right. They were just running the same film twice. Trying to save money, I supposed, thinking an old man wouldn't notice. This time, when he waved, I didn't bother to raise my hand.

The boy seemed to be trying to stifle a laugh.

I'd always had a bad temper.

Of course, it made me mad.

And then the girl again. The clover, the bare legs, the hole. I was shaking. It was like that copy of the copy of the copy of the letter my mother had written to me, dug up out of the trunk by my daughter, which she'd mailed off to everybody and their cousin before she thought to bring it over to me. *Daddy, I found this in the attic, and I thought you'd want a copy.*

And my own mother's handwriting, like a retarded child's.

And she couldn't even spell the name of the month.

Which was February.

And something about when I get you back I'm going to get you that little dog.

That little dog.

It was back. But it was behind me. It was smiling up at me from my own rug. And then it was on the couch. And then it was under the coffee table. Pissing on the leg of it. Taking a crap on the carpet. Then lunging in my direction. Then snapping at my heels. Then tearing at the cuffs of my trousers with its teeth. *Get outta here, get outta here.* I was kicking at it, and the girl was screaming, *Help help, someone get him offa me.* But I didn't care about that. I was going to have her if it was the last thing I ever had. My pants were down around my ankles, and I was sure as hell going to stick it inside her, and then some fat woman in white stepped out into

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the waiting room and said, only her eyebrow twitching a little, *I'm sorry to tell ya the baby has died.* I shrugged. I said, *D'ya tell my wife?*

Soon enough, I'd stumbled out the door, just as I'm sure they'd planned it. The dog sobered up and started whining to be petted. The little boy said, "I *knew* you'd come out to play, Mr. Rentz. I knew it! I knew it!" The tractor and the farmer and the little girl, as if someone up there just kept hitting *rewind rewind.* That girl stood up and I could see my seed trickling down her thigh. I stifled a laugh, chuckling behind my hand, *How stupid do you think I am?*

Well, that's how stupid I am.

And then I heard the door slam behind me.

And then the boy turned to look at me with those big serious eyes and said, "I'm sorry to have had to mislead you, Mr. Rentz."

And I said, "Oh, kid, forget it. I understand."

And we shuffled off into the dust, the two of us — the beautiful boy I might have been and the dog I might have had — in search of the old lost man I had become.

"I wanted to show you the amount of paperwork you'll miss by dying early."

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Carolyn Gilman's latest book is a collection of short stories, Aliens of the Heart. *Her latest story is a tale of a planet that's mostly water and of a woman who's not sure she fits in on this world.*

Arkfall

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

1. GOLCONDA STATION

NORMALLY, THE LIQUID SKY over Golconda was oblivion black: no motion, no beacons to clock the passage of time. But at Arkfall the abyss kindled briefly with drifting lights. From a distance, they looked like a rain of photisms, those false lights that swim in darkened eyes. First a mere smudge of light, then a globe, and finally a pockmarked little world floating toward the seafloor station.

The arks were coming home.

From the luminous surface of the ark *Cormorin*, Osaji felt the opacity that had oppressed her for months lifting. All around her, arks floated like wayward thoughts piercing the deep unconsciousness of the sea. The sight was worth having put on the wetsuit and squeezed out to see. She was oblivious to the pressure of the deep water, having been born and bred to it. Even the chill, only a few degrees above freezing, seemed mild to her, warmed by the volcanic exhalations of the Cleft of Golconda on the seafloor below.

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After months of drifting through the Saltese Sea, the arkswarm had come for respite to the station of Golconda, the place where their rounds began and ended. Osaji's light-starved eyes, accustomed to seeing only the glowing surface of her own ark and any others that happened to be drifting nearby, savored the sense of space and scale that the glowing domes and refinery lights below her created. There was palpable distance here, an actual landscape.

It would have looked hellish enough to other eyes. A chain of seafloor vents snaked along the valley floor, glowing in places with reddish rock-heat. Downstream, black smokers belched out a filthy brew loaded with minerals from deep under the planet's gravity-tortured crust. Tall chimneys encased the older vents. Everywhere the seafloor was covered with thick, mucky vegetation feeding on the dissolved nutrients: fields of tubeworms, blind white crabs, brine shrimp, clams, eels, seagrass, tiny translucent fish. The carefully nurtured ecosystem had been transported from faraway Earth to this watery planet of Ben. To Osaji, the slimy brown jungle looked like the richest crop, the most fertile field, a welcoming abundance of life. Patient generations had created it.

Beside her, a pore in the lipid membrane of the ark released a jet of bubbles, making the vessel sink slowly toward the floodlit harbor where a dozen other arks already clustered, docked to flexible tube chutes that radiated from the domes like glowing starfish arms. It was time for Osaji to go inside, but still she lingered. All her problems lay inside *Cormorin*'s membrane, neatly packaged. Once she went inside, they would immerse her again.

A voice sputtered over her ear radio, "Will she be coming in soon?" It was the Bennite idiom: tentative, nonconfrontational. But no less coercive for that. Osaji sighed, making her breather mask balloon out, and answered, "She will be pleased to."

Pushing off, she dived downward past the equator of the ark's globe, gliding over its silvery surface. The top portion of the ark was filled with bladders of gas that controlled buoyancy and atmosphere, along with the tanks of bacteria and algae that processed seawater into usable components. Only at the bottom did the humans live, like little mitochondria in their massive host.

On the ark's underbelly Osaji found a pore, tickled its edges till it

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expanded, then thrust her arms and head in, pulling herself though the soft, clinging lips of the opening. Inside, she shook the water off her short black hair and removed her facemask and fins. She was in a soft-walled, gently glowing tube leading upward to the living quarters. As she walked, her feet bounded back from the rubbery floor.

The quarters seemed brightly lit by the snaking vapor-tubes on the ceiling. As soon as Osaji entered the bustling corridor, Dori's two children crowded around her, asking questions. Their mother peered out the aperture of her room and called to them, "Is it polite to bother her when she has so much packing to do?" The comment was really aimed at Osaji. Dori's family had left her in no doubt that she and her baggage would be leaving the ark at Golconda.

Osaji ran her finger along the sensitive lip of the aperture into her own small rooms, and the membrane retracted to let her through. The first cavity inside, where Osaji had lived for the last round, was stripped bare, all her belongings packed into sacks and duffels. She paused at the aperture to the adjoining vacuole and called out, "Mota?"

"Saji?" came a thin voice from within. Osaji coaxed the membrane open and had to suppress a groan of dismay. Inside, a frail, white-haired woman sat amid a disorganized heap of belongings. She had not packed a thing since Osaji had left her. If anything, she had emptied out some of the duffels already packed.

The old woman's mild face lit up. "Thank goodness you're back! I was getting worried. Where did you go?"

"Outside. I told you I was going outside."

"Did you." She was not contradicting, just commenting. No argument or reproach ever came from Mota. She was the sweetest-tempered aged on the planet. It sometimes drove her granddaughter to distraction.

"Time is short now," Osaji said, seizing a sack and starting to shove clothes in it. "*Cormorin* docks at Golconda in a few minutes."

"I remember Golconda," Mota said reflectively.

"I know you do. You must have been there sixty times."

"Your mother, Manuko, got off there one round and tried going barnacle. She could never get used to it. But your sister — she actually married a barnacle." She said it as if Osaji had never heard the news.

"Yes, we're going to see her in a few minutes."

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"Oh, good," Mota said. "That will be nice."

Osaji didn't say: And you are going to stay with her from now on, and set me free.

The gentle jostle of docking came before Osaji was ready. Dori poked her head in the aperture to say, "We've arrived. Everyone can leave now."

Seething inside, Osaji said pleasantly, "In a moment."

Cormorin had not been a happy ark this round. When joining, Osaji had mistaken Dori's conventional expressions of respect for real tolerance of the aged. Once under way, Dori had voiced one sweetly phrased complaint after another, and it had become obvious that she resented Mota's presence. The old lady should not walk the corridors alone, because she might fall. She shouldn't be allowed in the kitchen, because she might put on a burner and forget it. She shouldn't help with the cleaning, because her eyes were too poor to see dirt. Once, Dori had said to Osaji, "Caring for an aged is so much responsibility. I already have as much as I can bear." So she had taken no responsibility at all for Mota. Everything had landed on Osaji, making Dori hint with false sympathy that she wasn't pulling her weight around the ark. Mota had ended the round a virtual prisoner in her room, because just seeing her seemed to give Dori a fresh case of martyrdom.

The corridors of Golconda station were a shock to anyone fresh from floatabout. A floater's world was a yielding womb of liquid where there was never a raised voice, never a command given; floaters all went their lone ways, within the elaborate choreography of their shared mission. The barnacles' world was a gray, industrial place of hard floors, angles, crowds, and noise. Barnacles had to move in coordinated lockstep — cooperative obedience, they called it. They were packed in too close to survive any other way. The two ways of life were the yin and yang of Ben: each needed the other, but neither partook of the other's nature.

A line of porters stood by with electric carts in the hallway, so Osaji approached one, trying to conceal her diffidence. Codes of courtesy were abrupt here, because barnacles always thought time for interaction was short. The porter named an outrageous price. When she attempted to tell her story, he said the Authority set the amount, and there was nothing he could do about it. She gave in, feeling diminished.

Mota's baggage filled the cart, so Osaji gave the porter the address, saw

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the old lady safely seated beside him, and hefted her own bags to walk, more to avoid dealing with another driver than to save the money. Soon she was feeling jostled and invaded-upon. The corridor was half blocked off by some noisy construction, and the moving crowd was compressed into a narrow chute made dingy with too many passing feet and too much human exhalation. When she emerged into one of the domes, she looked for a spot out of traffic to gaze at the wonder of wide space. The brightly lit geodesic framework spanned a parklike area of greenery ringed with company shops and Authority offices. A grove of trees soared a breathtaking twenty feet over her head. They lifted her heart on their branches: she, too, had the potential to grow lofty. If only she could worm past this stricture in her life, she would be able to reach up again.

And yet, above the trees, the weight of a frigid planetary ocean pressed down. It was a Quixotic gesture of the builders, really, to have nurtured a form of life so unsuited to the environment. Perhaps the human genome was coded for this urge to put things where they didn't belong. Osaji knew floaters who spoke of the trees with hauteur, for they were symbols of inadaptibility. The floaters were the ones who had pioneered a truly Bennite way of life, not this transplanted impossibility of a habitat. Osaji caught her breath in wonder as a bright bird winged overhead.

The impulse to act on her long-laid plans grew strong in her. Why not now, before she saw her family, so it would be an accomplished fact? She knew the proper place to go, for she had sought it out last round, but without enough resolve. This time would be different.

The Immigration Authority was a neatly aligned place. The agents sat behind a row of plain desks, and the clients sat in three straight lines of chairs facing them, waiting for their numbers to be called. No one looked at anyone else. The agents' soft voices filled the room with a background of sibilant word-sounds that made no words.

When Osaji's turn came to face an agent, she dropped her bags in an untidy heap on the floor around her chair. She had barely sat down before she blurted out, "Your client wishes to leave the planet."

The agent was a young woman about Osaji's age, but much prettier, wearing a blue uniform with a crisp white collar. Calm and competent, she said, "Why would that be?"

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Osaji had not come prepared to answer this question. She swam in a sea of reasons, drowning in them. She was afraid to open her mouth for fear she would choke on them. At last she chose one that seemed least dangerous. "To see new places."

"So it is a tourism desire?" the young woman asked politely. Her hands were folded on the desktop.

"No." Osaji realized that she had made it sound trivial and self-indulgent. "It is necessary for opportunity. To broaden one's self."

"Education, then?"

Knowing the next question would be which offworld academy had admitted her, Osaji said, "No. It is better to work one's way."

"Financial enrichment?"

"No!" That was antisocial selfishness. "A person needs to learn the ways of the great worlds, to experience different cultures. How else can a person's mind expand? Ben is small and stifling."

Though she had spoken the last words very softly, the agent caught them. Outwardly, the woman did not react, but her questions changed.

"Has the Great Work ceased to inspire?"

"No." Osaji shifted nervously. She still felt the Great Work of creating a habitable planet from this cratered ball of ice was a noble one, and she honored the dedication of the generations who had gotten this far. But it was slow, centuries-slow, and she would not live to see it done. If she did not leave, she would never even see what a habitable planet looked like. "It is just.... We *are* free to leave? They always say so."

The agent smiled, making her even more formidably pretty. "Of course. It is just that clients often think they wish to leave when what they really need is to solve some personal problem. It would be very selfish to ask us to spend the resources to send a person off-planet just because someone cannot face an obligation."

The shame Osaji felt then was like nausea, a sickness rising from her stomach. The woman had seen right through her. Osaji had tried to cloak her cowardice in brave fantasies to make it look less ugly. The truth was, leaving Ben meant abandoning her own grandmother, that sweet and helpless aged who had raised her and who now chained her with responsibility she didn't want. It was so low, Osaji sat staring at her hands folded in her lap, unable to raise her eyes. And yet, losing her hope of escape felt

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so painful she couldn't move from the chair, couldn't let some other more deserving person take her place.

The agent said gently, "Very few people who leave Ben like it on other worlds. We are not suited for that sort of life. Besides, it is nobler to face things here than to flee."

Osaji made no sound, but prickly tears began to brim over and drip on her clasped hands. She tried to think as a noble person ought to, about bravely facing her problems, but instead she felt a black resentment. Mota would live for many years yet. Her body did not make her old; her straying mind was the problem. The disease had come upon her early — so early that Osaji, the last grandchild, did not yet have a life of her own, and so became the family solution. The true tragedy was Mota's. But being her caretaker, there was nothing to aim for — no goal, only monotonous endurance until the end. And then what? All Osaji's chances would be gone by then.

At that lowest point, when her prison seemed impenetrable, she was distracted in the most irritating way, by a raised voice at the desk next to her. A wiry, weatherbeaten foreigner was berating his agent.

"Are you going to get your prigging rear in gear, or do I have to raise hell?"

The man's agent, a timid young woman who looked acutely embarrassed by the attention he was drawing, tried to calm him in a low tone.

"Don't you whisper at me, you simpering little bureaucrat," he said even louder. "You are going to give me a visa and a ticket on the first shuttle out of this clam steamer, or you are going to hear some real decibels."

"Please, sir," she pleaded. "Shouting at your agent will not solve your problem."

"You don't know what a problem is, sister. At this rate, you're going to know pretty soon."

Osaji's agent went to the rescue of her traumatized colleague. "What seems to be the issue?"

The unkempt offworlder turned on her. He was only half-shaved, and wore mercenary coveralls. "The *issue*, my dear, is this whole lickspittle planet — on which vertebrate life does not yet exist. The entire goddamned culture is based on passive aggression. Don't you all know this is a *frontier*? Where's your initiative, your self-reliance? Where are your new

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horizons? I've never seen such an insular, myopic, conformist, small-minded bunch of people in my life. This planet is a small town preserved in formaldehyde. Get me *out* of here!"

Osaji had often thought the same things about Ben, but hearing them expressed so coarsely made her bristle. The intensity of the emotions she had been feeling reversed polarity, turning outward at the hateful offworlder beside her. He had had chances she would never get, and what had he done with them?

A manager came out from one of the back offices and tried to draw the man into a private room to pacify him. The offworlder, perhaps sensing he would lose his audience, stood up to defend his ground. He was short and his spindly legs were a little bowed, but he had a ferocious demeanor.

"Do you know who you're talking to, son?" he said. "Ever hear of Scrappin' Jack Halliday, who captured Plamona Outpost in the War of the Wrist?" When no one around him showed the slightest recognition, he gave an oath. "Of course not. You bottom-dwellers don't care about anything unless it happens ten feet in front of your noses."

The manager tried to be conciliatory, but Osaji could see it would have no effect. Her anger had been burning like a slow fuse all last round, and now it reached the end. She stood up and shouted, "Did you come here just to make us listen to your profanity and your complaints? If you can't make it on Ben, that's too bad — but stop whining!"

Scrappin' Jack looked like he had been ambushed from the direction he least expected. Rattled, he stared at Osaji as if hearing phantom sniper fire, and all he said was, "What the — ?"

A little appalled at what she had done, Osaji sat down again facing her agent. At last the manager was able to lead the intemperate offworlder away. The office slowly resumed its normal functioning.

"That's what they're all like on the other worlds," Osaji's agent said in a low voice. "An emigrant has to cope with that, day in and day out. Are you sure — ?"

"No," Osaji said. "I think the lifestream put him there to show me something. I am not supposed to leave Ben."

The agent smiled encouragingly.

"I am grateful for your good work." Outwardly composed again, Osaji gathered up her bags and left, feeling wrung out but relieved.

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2. BARNACLES AND FLOATERS

OSAJI'S SISTER KITANI lived with her family in a dome that was divided up into pie-shaped Domestic Units surrounding a central dining and recreation area. Kitti's DU was on the second floor, meaning it was smaller, though the family had been on the waiting list for an upgrade for two rounds. It was one of the compromises people made to live barnacle. Brother-in-law Juko answered the door with a red-faced, howling baby in his arms. He was a gangling man with a perpetual, slightly goofy smile — and it was just as well, for the hubbub he ushered her into would have induced hypertension in anyone less tuned out. The DU had only two rooms — a sleeproom and an everything-else room — and their older daughter was having a tantrum in the sleeproom. The main room was simply crammed with furniture, cookware, baby strollers, clothes, and diaper bins. Mota's baggage formed an obstacle in the middle of the floor. "Tell your Aunt Saji it is good to see her," Juko shouted to the baby in his arms. As an in-law, it wasn't polite for him to speak to Osaji directly.

Osaji dumped her bags on the floor — there was nowhere else to put them — and tried to give Juko a greeting just as the baby threw up all down his front. He smiled as if his face didn't know what else to do, and disappeared into the sleeproom.

Osaji's grandmother sat in an armchair, looking slightly dazed. Kitti came out of the sleeproom and gave Osaji a frazzled hug. Looking at the mound of baggage, she said, "Is it that you're changing arks?"

"Yes," Osaji said. "It wasn't a good fit, with *Cormorin*." Propriety forbade her to come any closer to speaking ill of others.

"That's too bad," Kitti said with a remote, distracted sympathy, as if it didn't concern her. Osaji wanted to pull her aside right then and make her plea, but it didn't seem like the right moment.

The right moment didn't come that evening, either — a crowded, chaotic succession of rearrangements, feedings, and infant outbursts. Not until the next morning did Osaji and Kitti get some time alone together, when they took the children to the playground in an adjoining dome. They sat on a bench and watched barnacle children frolic under the overhanging sea.

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Kitti was first to bring up the subject. "Mota's really deteriorated," she said. The bald declaration — not tentative, not a question — showed how shocked she had been. It made Osaji uncomfortable.

"You think so?" she said, though it was exactly what she had wanted to talk about.

"Don't you? She's much more weak and unsteady on her feet. You ought to get her more exercise. You know, ageds can still build up muscle tone if they work at it."

"Ah," Osaji said.

"And her mind seems to be wandering. She repeats herself, and loses track of what people are saying. You need to stimulate her more, challenge her mentally, get her involved."

"Isn't it just that she is old?" Osaji said.

Kitti mistook it for a real question. "Age doesn't have to mean deterioration. There are plenty of ageds who are still intelligent and active."

"But Mota's not."

"No, she needs to be encouraged to improve herself."

Osaji felt an upwelling of desperation. "I've been wondering whether an ark is the best setting for her. Perhaps she would be better off elsewhere."

"Where?" Kitti said. "The domes for the aged are overcrowded, and you can't get anyone in without a medical permit. She's not that badly off."

"Still, it's really hard in an ark. There's no room for unproductives in an ark. And it's not just her; she makes me an unproductive too, because I have to look after her. It's two wasted berths, not just one." And two wasted lives.

Abruptly, Kitti changed the subject. "What about you? Have you met anyone?"

Osaji thought back on the slow torture of the last round: every day regimented by the need to look after Mota punctually. Not once had she broken free from that elastic band of obligation. Not for one moment had Mota been completely out of her mind. There had been no space left for anything else.

"You could register, you know," Kitti said. "The computers do a good job matching people."

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Most Bennites found mates this way. In a place where everyone lived in isolated pockets scattered about the seafloor, it was the most practical way to meet someone compatible. Osaji had resisted it for years, out of a waning hope that she would meet someone the old, magical way, guided by the fateful currents of the lifestream. At the thought of her naivete, she felt a sharp ache of disappointment. "Who would take a mate with an aged attached?" she said, and the bitterness sounded in her voice.

Kitti finally heard it. "You can't let her ruin your life," she said.

Though Kitti had not meant to sound accusatory, Osaji felt it that way. She burst out, "Kitti, if you would only take her for a round...."

"Me?" Kitti said in astonishment. "I have the young ones. You've seen our DU."

"I know." But the young ones, the DU — they were all Kitti's choices. Osaji had had no choices of her own. Kitti's had foreclosed all of hers.

The feeling of constriction returned. The thought of another round like the last was unendurable.

"I'm afraid," Osaji said in a low voice, "that I'm going to start to hate her."

Warmly, Kitti put an arm around Osaji's shoulder and hugged her tight. "Oh, you would never do that. You're a good and loving granddaughter. What you do for her is really admirable." She looked in Osaji's bleak face and said coaxingly, "Come on, smile. I know you love her, and that's what counts."

Kitti had gotten so used to dealing with children that she couldn't interact any other way. All problems seemed like childhood problems to her, all solutions reduced to lollipops and lullabies. Osaji stood abruptly, wanting to do something evil, wanting to do anything but what a good and loving granddaughter would do.

That evening, after dinner, she rose and said, "It is necessary to go on an errand." Luckily, Kitti and Juko were busy with the children, and no one offered to go with her.

The docks were still crowded with delivery carts, baggage handlers, and floaters coming and going. She walked down the harshly lit aisle, pausing at each tubular port where arkmates had posted their crew needs. She hurried past *Cormorin*'s port, noting resentfully that they were advertising two berths.

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While she was reading a posting for a hydroponics technician, wondering if she could pass, a too-familiar voice made her whirl around and look. There he was — the outworlder, Scrappin' Jack, trying to impress a circle of young longshoremen. She could hardly believe the authorities had not gotten rid of him. As her eyes fell on him, he looked up and saw her. "Holy crap," he said, "it's the shrew."

Quickly she looked away to avoid any further contact, but he was not so easily discouraged. Pushing through the traffic, he came to her side. He was barely taller than she, a compressed packet of offensiveness. "Listen," he said, "about yesterday, in that office — you've got to understand, I was tripped out on cocaine."

As if that were an excuse. She scowled. "Why would an outworld mercenary come here?"

He gave a dry, rasping laugh. "Sister, you're not the first to ask. They asked me all through those godawful treatments for high-pressure adaptation. But rumor was, there were empty spaces here, unexplored territory, room to spread out. All true — it's just under tons of water, and the habitations are a bit too togetherly for me."

An idea occurred to her, brilliant in its spitefulness. "Has he considered going on floatabout? That is the way to explore Ben." To spend months trapped in a bubble drifting through opaque blackness, that was the real Ben. It would drive the man mad.

"You think so?" he said.

"Yes," she said encouragingly. "There is an ark looking for new crew. It's named *Cormorin*, just down the hall there. An applicant should ask for Dori."

He looked like he was actually considering it. "Why not?" he said. "It couldn't get worse. Thanks, kiddo."

As he was turning to go, the floor shifted slightly underfoot, and the hanging lamps swayed. He stumbled. "Whoa," he said, "I thought I was sober." Osaji didn't bother to tell him it had been a ground tremor, all too common here along the cleft. She turned to escape the other way.

Across the hall, at the mouth to the next port, a tall, lean woman with a patch over one eye was watching, cross-armed. As Osaji passed, she said, "Is someone looking for an opening?"

Osaji stopped. The woman's shaggy hair was gray-streaked, but she

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looked fit, with a composed, cool look of self-sufficience about her. The eye patch seemed like an affectation, a declaration of nonconformity, and Osaji suddenly decided she liked it.

"Lura of *Divernon*," the woman introduced herself.

"Osaji of...nowhere, right now."

"*Divernon* needs a hand to help out at odd jobs, particularly wet ones."

Osaji looked down. "Your applicant enjoys wet." She could not say she was good at it — that would seem unhumble — but she was. "Her profile is listed in the registry."

"I don't need to see her profile," Lura said. "I just saw her handle that offworld jerk."

Osaji looked up, astonished that anyone would commit to a crewmate without studying their compatibility profile. Lura's one eye was disconcertingly alert, but laughing. From her face, it looked like she often laughed.

"Does the young adventurer come with anyone else?" she asked.

Osaji blushed, feeling a pang, but said, "No."

"It would not matter if they were less than married." Lura had mistaken the cause of the blush.

"How many does *Divernon* hold?" Osaji asked, to change the subject.

"Myself, Mikita — and you. We were hoping to get a couple to join us, but we can't wait any longer. The Authority wants us to vacate this port tonight."

"Just three?" It was a skeleton crew. They would work hard, but enjoy a lot of privacy.

"*Divernon*'s last crew got married and left us," Lura said wryly. "Maybe a single will be safer."

That sounded like a happy ark, if a little lonely. But just now, lonely seemed good. "The ark leaves tonight?" she said.

"Can Osaji of nowhere be ready?"

"Yes. She needs to fetch her baggage."

"Fetch away," Lura said.

As Osaji hailed an electric cart, she could scarcely believe what she was doing. Joining an ark on impulse, without studying the others' profiles, without even meeting one of the two she would spend the next round with. It was an act of lunacy, or desperation.

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When she got back to Kitti's DU, she had the cart driver wait out of sight while she went in, hoping to find the others preparing for bed so she could slip out unseen. Juko was in the sleeproom putting the children to bed, but Kitti was still in the front with Mota. She had opened up Mota's baggage and was sorting through it. One wastebasket was already overflowing with items she had decided to discard.

"What are you doing?" Osaji said.

"Getting rid of some of the useless junk she is hauling around," Kitti said with efficient cheerfulness. "Really, Saji, haven't you looked through these bags? Some of this stuff must be fifty years old." She held up a battered wooden flute, missing its reed. "What's this for?"

It was the flute Great-uncle Yamada had played on the day they married the two arks, *Steptoe* and *Elderon*, when Mota was young. Osaji had heard the story so many times she had often thought she would scream before hearing it again. She looked to Mota, expecting her to start the tale, but the old lady was withdrawn and silent.

"Do you play it?" Kitti asked pointedly. Mota shook her head. "Then what use is it? Why carry it around?"

"Do whatever you want with it," Mota said, looking away. "I don't mind."

Kitti stuffed it in the trash bin.

Osaji looked at the discards. There was the dirty plush toy their grandfather had given Mota when she first got pregnant, the rock Yamada had brought from the surface, the little shell pendant for luck. Osaji knew all the stories. "Kitti, these things are hers. You can't just throw them out."

"I'm asking her," Kitti said. "She agrees."

Osaji could see it now: Mota was going to become an improvement project for Kitti. And Mota would just acquiesce, as she always had done. She had spent so many years trying to please others, she didn't even remember what it was like to want something for herself. A tweak of compassion made Osaji say, "Can I talk to her, Kitti?"

Kitti climbed to her feet. "I've got to go check on the little ones."

Osaji sat down next to Mota. The old woman took her hand and squeezed it, but said nothing.

"Mota, I need to know something," Osaji said softly. "Do you want

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to come with me for another round on an ark, or would you rather stay here?"

Mota said nothing. Osaji waited, then said, "You have to decide. I'm leaving tonight."

"I want whatever you want," Mota said. "Whatever makes you happy."

Even though she had half known that would be the answer, Osaji still felt a familiar burn of frustration. Her grandmother's passivity was a kind of manipulation: a way to put all the responsibility onto others, an abdication of adulthood. Mota had always been like this, and there was absolutely no way to fight it. It made everyone around her into petty dictators. Osaji hated the role, and she hated Mota for forcing her into it.

It should have been a decision made in love, but instead it was grim duty in Osaji's heart when she said, "All right. You're coming with me."

She emptied out the wastebasket and stuffed all the things back into the bag they had come from, then hefted as many duffels as she could carry and took them down to the waiting cart. The baggage took three trips, and on the fourth she helped Mota to the door. It crossed her mind to leave without saying anything, but at the last moment she stuck her head in the sleeproom door. "Kitti, we're going now. Our ark is leaving."

"Now?" Kitti sounded startled, but not unhappy at the news. She got up to hug them both, wish them a happy round, and to press some food on them, which Osaji declined.

All the way to the docks Osaji rehearsed what to say to her new arkmates. But when they got to *Divernon*, there was no sign of Lura, or anyone else. She helped Mota through the flexible tube into the ark, calling out "Hello? *Divernons*?" There was no answer.

Finding the spare quarters was easy, so she left Mota inside and went back to ferry in the baggage. It occurred to her that it would be easy to hide Mota's presence till they had embarked, and then it would be too late for anyone to object.

She had just hooked the last bag over her shoulder and paid the driver when a shout from down the hall made her freeze. "Hey, shrike!"

It was Scrappin' Jack, coming down the hall like a torpedo locked on her coordinates. She would have ducked inside the ark, but feared he would just follow her.

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From twenty feet away he bellowed, "What's the idea, sending me to that shrink-wrapped prig?"

Everyone in earshot was staring, and Osaji could feel her ears glow. "A man should be quiet," she pleaded.

"You thought you could pull a fast one on Scrappin' Jack, did you? Well, news flash: it takes more balls than you've got to screw me over." He waved a hand as if to clear away invisible gnats. "That didn't come out right."

"Go away!" Osaji commanded. Down the hall, Lura was approaching with another woman at her side. Keenly aware of first impressions, Osaji tried to pretend that the raging eruption in front of her did not exist. She waved at them cheerfully.

With a deafening crash, the floor jerked sideways, flinging everyone to the ground. Carts overturned, their contents scattered, and broken glass rained down. Again the floor bucked, sending Osaji skidding across tile into a wall with bruising force. For a moment there was silence, except for the groan of stressed girders and the ominous sound of falling water. A stream of it was running down the floor. Then a third jolt came. Osaji scrabbled for a handhold.

"Quick, into the ark!" said a voice, and Lura's strong hand was pulling her up. Osaji was lying across the entry, blocking the way into the ark. Not trusting her balance, she scrambled on hands and knees up the chute. When she got into the ark, it was bobbing around in the turbulent water like a balloon on a string. Barely able to keep upright, she turned to help Lura through — and found it was not Lura behind her after all. It was the spacer, Jack.

"What is the awful man doing here?" Osaji cried.

He looked as buffeted as she. "Some pirate dyke shoved me in the umbilical and told me to climb. I climbed."

"Where is she?"

At that moment the room turned sideways and they were thrown in a heap onto the yielding wall. The aperture connecting them to the mooring tube contracted and disappeared. That meant they had broken free of the tube; but still the ark wasn't rising. Instead of floating in the smooth motion of the sea, *Divernon* was jerking like a leashed animal.

"There's still a mooring line attached," Osaji said. She snatched up

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the breather and face mask that had been knocked from their pocket on the wall. "I'm going to find Lura. You, stay here."

There was no time to put on a suit, so she just stripped to her underwear, strapped on the mask, and thrust head-first through the lips of the orifice. Only a few bubbles of air escaped with her.

The first shock was the temperature of the water — bathtub warm. The second was the noise — a mere growl inside, here it was like the roar of a thousand engines. The water was nearly opaque, full of roiled-up sediment. The harbor lights were still on, turning everything into a golden brown fog. Feeling her way along the surface of the ark, she searched blindly for the line that was tying them down, for it would lead to the station.

It was taut when she found it; the ark was tugging on it like a creature mad to escape. By feel, she traced it down to a clip attached to a U-bolt on the dock. Now she realized what must have happened; the other two lines had broken, detaching the ark from the landing tube before Lura and her companion could get in. Now Osaji only had to find the tube in this blinding muck.

Before she could move, she felt the metal under her foot bowing out. The last U-bolt was giving way. She clutched the line tight as if she could pull the ark down, and keep it tethered.

There was a metallic pop and the bolt came loose. With Osaji still clinging to the line, the ark rose swiftly into the upwelling water. Instinctively she hung on as water raced past her ears.

They quickly cleared the turbid layer, and Osaji saw what lay below. The Cleft of Golconda was erupting. A raging glow of blood-red lava snaked along the seafloor, obscured by hellish clouds of steam. As she looked down on the station, another tremor passed through it, and a panel on the largest dome collapsed. In seconds, the adjacent panels were caving inward, the dome crumpling. A huge bubble of air escaped, and all the lights went out except the livid lava.

The ark was caught in a steam-propelled plume of hot water, flying upward. Darkness closed in. Osaji could no longer see the cleft below, nor the line above; the only light in the world was the dim bioluminescent globe of *Divernon*. Her hands were turning numb. She forced them to clamp down on the line. If she let go, she was lost.

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Her ears began to pop. They were rising too fast; the pressure was dropping dangerously. She needed to get inside quickly. Setting her teeth, she tried to climb the line, hand over hand; but she was pulling against the rushing water, and didn't have the strength.

Then she felt a tug on the line, and her spirits revived. She kicked to draw closer. Pain shot through her legs. *Get me in!* she prayed.

The skin of *Divernon* was stretched taut, she saw as she came closer to it. If the ark kept on rising, it would pop like an overfilled balloon, unless someone inside vented gas. Slowly, too slowly, the distance between her and the ark's skin lessened. At last she could reach up and grasp the edge of the hole where the line disappeared inside. But when it began to open to admit her, the pressurized gas inside came shooting out in a jet, sending the ark spinning and wrapping the line around it. Osaji's body thumped against the surface hard enough to knock the breath out of her. But it was just what she needed. She let go of the line and it snaked away into darkness while she clung to the tacky surface of the ark. It felt reassuringly familiar. Slowly, muscles cramping, she crept along till she got to the orifice, and dived inside.

Someone was swearing. It sounded like, "Bull banging damn!"

The ark was still spinning; Osaji was thrown forward on top of Scrappin' Jack as the wall turned into the floor, then into a wall again. As the rotation slowed, they came to rest a few feet apart, staring at each other.

"What the gutting hell are you doing alive?" he said, holding up the empty end of the line. When she had let go, he must have thought her lost.

"Such concern is touching," she said sourly. Ignoring the shooting pains in her arms, she started barefoot up the rubbery organic tube toward the control pod. Jack followed close on her heels.

The control pod of *Divernon* was more elaborately equipped than any she had seen. Arrayed around a curving console, four screens lit the darkened room in eerie colors. Things tumbled about in the spin still littered the floor.

Osaji had been in control pods many times, but had never navigated. Gingerly, she sat down in the swiveling seat, staring at the screens to figure out the ark's status. Jack peered over her shoulder, muttering.

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"Sonar, temperatures...what the hell is that?" he pointed at a screen with an animated 3-D diagram.

Osaji was looking at that one, too. "Currents," she said, then pointed to a tiny red point. "That is us."

It showed their true peril. All around them, angry pillars of heated water rose, a forest of deadly plumes, dwarfing them.

Osaji looked for the pressure ratio, and exclaimed, "May the lifestream preserve us!" The pressure inside was enough to burst the ark. "We've got to vent gas, now, or we'll explode."

But her hand hung motionless over the control, for the choice of where to vent was critical. The jet of released air would propel them in the opposite direction, and if they floated into one of those hot plumes, that would be the end. She searched desperately for a safe choice. There was none.

"What are you waiting for?" Jack said.

"I can't decide...."

"Just do it! Do you want to die?"

Still she hesitated, searching for a solution.

With an oath, Jack reached over her shoulder and slammed his palm down on the control himself.

"You evil, reckless man!" Osaji cried out. "You have killed us."

"You're the one who'll kill us, with your anal dithering," Jack yelled back.

The pressure dropped into a safer range, but just as Osaji had feared, they were slowly floating toward one of the hot upwellings.

Desperately she vented more air to stop their motion. But the plumes on the screen were shifting, converging, leaving *Divernon* no space. Again she vented as a plume seemed to reach out toward them. But it only sent them into the arms of another.

She sat back resignedly. "It is our fate."

"What is?" Jack demanded. He had no idea what was going on.

She didn't answer. She could feel *Divernon* shudder, then rock, as the swift current took it. They were rising again, like a bubble in boiling water, little bumps and shifts betraying their speed. Osaji wanted to look away, but couldn't take her eyes from the screen. Even as she watched, the heat was probably killing the bioengineered outer surface of the craft, the

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membrane on which their lives depended. It did not matter; they would die anyway, in the terrible heights where no human or habitation was meant to be.

3. THROUGH THE GAP

THE SONAR SCREEN was showing something strange. To their west was a solid return, something gigantic. Osaji increased the range, and felt a flutter of terror in her belly. It was a wall, a sheer cliff towering over them. There was only one thing it could be: the underwater mountain range that rimmed the ancient basin where life had taken such a precarious hold. Improbably, it seemed to curve outward over them like a mouth about to bite down. Osaji stared at the screen for several seconds before she realized what it showed. "Save us!" she exclaimed.

"What?" Jack asked.

"It is showing the bottom of the ice."

All her life it had been a rumor — the unseen cap on the sky, the lightless place where the world turned solid and all life stopped. She could feel it now, hanging above her, miles thick, heavy enough to crush them. She swallowed to quell a claustrophobic flutter in her chest. "The light shuns what is not meant to be looked on," she quoted a saying of the paracletes. Legend said that the underside of the ice was studded with the frozen corpses of people who had died without proper burial, and had floated up.

"I don't understand your problem," Jack said. He pointed to the screen. "The upwellings aren't as bad along the mountain range. Can't you just steer over there?"

Osaji closed her eyes and shook her head at his ignorance. "Our visitor thinks like a spacer," she said.

"So?"

"Arks are not ships. We have no propulsion system."

Jack looked thunderstruck. "You mean you can't control this thing?"

"We can rise and fall. In an emergency, we can vent air from the sides. But we go where the currents take us."

"What if there's no current that happens to be going where you want?"

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"Now the visitor understands our problem."

As they rose toward the cap on the world, the screen showing the currents above them changed. Where the upwellings hit the bottom of the ice, there was a region of turbulent eddies and horizontal flows.

Jack was fidgeting nervously. "What happens when we hit that?"

"We will go where the lifestream takes us."

"If the lifestream means to feed me to the crabs, I'm swimming against the current."

"On Ben, feeding crabs is a noble calling," Osaji answered. One was supposed to feel serene about it. "It is all part of the Great Work of seeding the ocean with life."

"No offense to Ben," said Jack darkly, "but a body donation wasn't in my plans."

How little anyone's plans counted now! Osaji stood up, saying, "I have to go check on something."

"You're leaving?" he said incredulously. "Now?"

"I need to see if my grandmother is all right."

"You've got an old lady in the ship?"

"Yes. She is not in good health. It would be good for someone to watch the screens while I am gone."

She sprinted down the springy corridor to the quarters where she had left Mota. The room was tumbled and chaotic from the ark's gymnastics. Mota was sitting on the bed, unharmed but confused and disoriented. "Saji, where am I?" she asked.

"Don't worry, Mota," Osaji said. She was about to explain the situation — the eruption, the heat plumes, their danger — when she saw that what Mota really wanted was much simpler. "We're in an ark called *Divernon*. This is your room. Don't unpack yet. I'll come back as soon as I can."

"This is my room?" Mota said, looking around fearfully.

"Yes. Think about how you want to fix it up."

"What ark are we in?"

With a shrinking feeling Osaji repeated, "*Divernon*."

"Aren't we going to Golconda?"

"We just came from Golconda. It — " The last sight of the station flashed vividly before her, cutting off her voice. She didn't want to say

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what she feared; she didn't even want to think it. Kitti and Juko, the trees, the playground where they had talked — all dark, all cold, all drowned.... She forced it out of her mind. If she thought about it, it might come true.

"Your sister lives there," Mota said. "I don't know how people can live that way, so crowded."

"Well, you don't have to worry about it," Osaji said. She caught Mota's hand and pressed it between hers, longing for the days when she was the child and Mota the one who took care of things. "Mota, I love you," she said. "I wish I could keep you safe."

She left wondering which would have been the more terrible error: dragging Mota along, or leaving her behind.

When she got back to the control pod, the displays had changed. While she had been gone, *Divernon* had hit the turbulent zone, and now a horizontal current was sweeping them swiftly westward, toward the rock wall. It looked like they were going to smash into it. Osaji stood next to the chair Jack was occupying, to indicate she wanted to sit down in it, but he was mesmerized by the screens and didn't notice her body language. She cleared her throat. "I might be able to keep us alive a little longer," she said.

"How?" he said.

Courtesy was wasted on him, so she said, "If you would allow me to sit...."

At last he got the message and let her have the chair.

The cliff was approaching at an alarming rate. Osaji vented air on their forward side to brake their speed, but they still felt the jar when *Divernon* hit, even inside all the cushioning internal organs. Osaji winced for the poor tortured membrane.

They caromed off the cliff and back into the current, spinning like a top. Now the sonar showed cliffs on every side of them. It took Osaji several seconds to realize they had been swept into a narrow cleft in the rim rock. For several minutes she kept busy sending out strategic jets of air to keep them from crashing into the rocks again.

"Is it safe to be venting so much air?" Jack asked.

It was his spacer instincts talking again. Preoccupied, Osaji said, "Oxygen is a waste product of the membrane cells' metabolism. We are constantly having to get rid of it."

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At last the turbulence eased and the cliffs drew back, but the current was still swift. Osaji glanced at the compass to see where they were headed. Then she looked again, for what it showed was impossible.

"That can't be," she said.

"What?"

"We're still going west. But the mountains are behind us."

Ahead, the sonar showed a rugged plain sloping downward. Every moment the current was carrying them farther into it. "We have been swept through a gap in the mountains," Osaji said. Her lips felt numb around the words.

"Is that bad?" Jack said.

"There is only one inhabited region on Ben. The Saltese Sea, behind us, beyond the mountains. We are going into the uninhabited waste."

There was a short silence as Jack absorbed this information. "What's in the uninhabited waste?" he said at last.

"Rocks, water, darkness. No life." No seafloor stations, no other arks, no human voices. For the next round, perhaps for every round after that, until their ark died.

"Send out a distress call," Jack said.

Osaji reached for the low-frequency radio, and spoke into it. "This is the ark *Divernon*. Can anybody hear me?" They waited. Only the hiss of an empty channel came back. Osaji spoke again. "This is *Divernon*. We have been swept through the mountains on the edge of the Saltese Sea. If you can hear us, please answer."

Only silence.

The empty hiss grew oppressive; Osaji switched it off.

"There's got to be something we can do," Jack said.

Trying to sound calm, Osaji said, "If the ark is not too badly damaged, it should recover. It is a self-sustaining system; it can live for many rounds."

"You're telling me this is it," he said. "I'm trapped till I die. In a goddamned underwater balloon along with an invalid and a harpy."

Osaji gave the grimmest smile in the world. "The outworlder is the lucky one," she said. "We are the ones trapped with him."

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4. THE WASTELAND

THREE DAYS LATER, Jack was still rebelling against their situation. He was a bundle of restless energy. While Osaji unpacked and arranged her quarters comfortably for herself and Mota, he prowled the ark, reading the manuals, trying to find a solution. At first she ignored him; but soon the time came to talk about dividing up the essential tasks of keeping an ark running. Osaji drew up a task wheel and brought it into the kitchen to negotiate the division of labor. It was a familiar routine to her, usually done on the third day of round.

But the daunting list of jobs made not a dimple in his monomania. All he wanted to talk about was another of his endless schemes.

"It's not like you don't have engine fuel," Jack said. "You've got a bagful of waste hydrogen up there."

"The hydrogen's not waste," Osaji said. "It is for our fuel cells, to make electricity."

"Then why not rig an electric motor to some propellers?"

"Does someone here know how to make an engine and propellers?"

He gave off a flare of indignation. "I'm not a bleeding mechanic. But damn it, I'd *try*. It's better than rolling over and taking whatever the lifestream sends you."

"It is antisocial to make one's personal problems into everyone's problems," Osaji said.

"Thank you, Miss Priss," Jack said acidly. He paced up and down before the kitchen table, two steps one way, two steps back. He was constantly in motion like that. It was like having a trapped animal in your home. "What possessed you Bennites to invent a vehicle without any controls?"

"An ark isn't a way of getting someplace," Osaji explained. "It is a place in itself."

He looked ready to ignite, a small two-legged bag of hydrogen himself. "Thanks, but *I* want to steer the place I'm in. This 'wherever you go, there you are' crap is why you've spent two centuries in the Saltese Sea without ever once having poked your noses out to see the rest of Ben. Wasn't anyone curious? No, you're content in your little bubbles. You've got an entire culture of agoraphobes."

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Irritated at his refusal to focus on the practical demands of their situation, Osaji set a pair of flippers and breather down on the table in front of him. "Here. Anyone who doesn't wish to be here can swim back."

"Go to hell."

Osaji had had enough of him. She took back the swim gear, and said, "All right, I am going out."

"Out? What do you mean?" He followed her into the corridor.

"Someone has to check the membrane. I should have done it before."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Yes." She stopped and turned to him. "It will be a shame if you are left without someone to abuse. Now let me go."

Above the living quarters, the enormous bladders for air, fuel, and ballast water were swollen, shadowy shapes in the dim glow of the outer membrane. Taking a handful of the tough, fibrous white roots that grew on the inside of the globe surface, Osaji hoisted herself up the outer wall. The roots were wet, and soon her hands and feet were glowing white, covered with luminescent bacteria. The smell was fresh and invigorating, for the air here was rich with oxygen. When she had been a child, it had been a favorite game to climb the globe wall and then throw herself down onto the pillowy bladders below. Then, she had not appreciated the consequences of accidentally puncturing one of the membranes.

She had come this way because, despite her bravado in front of Jack, she was afraid to go out. The main orifice to the outside was at the bottom of the ark, and normally she would have used it. But there were emergency entry pores scattered throughout, and one of them was close to the part of the membrane she most needed to inspect.

It was odd; she had never been afraid of the outside before. In fact, she had relished escaping from the close confines of the ark, and always volunteered for wet work. But back home in the Saltese Sea, she had known exactly what lay outside. All the landmarks were mapped, the waters familiar. Here, her rational mind knew from the sensors that nothing was different, but the animal-instinct part of her brain didn't care.

She squeezed out the aperture like a slippery melon seed, into the embrace of cold and silence. At first she clung with her back to the tacky surface of the ark, peering into the water. The dark had a different quality here. In the Saltese Sea, you always knew that light and life hovered just

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beyond the edge of sight. Here, the dark was absolute ruler. Their ark was a mote in an emptiness the size of continents.

She unhooked the battery-powered searchlight from her belt. For a moment before turning it on, she had to steel herself, not quite knowing what she feared. When at last she shone it out into the water, it revealed nothing. Or, rather, only one thing: the water was extraordinarily clear. No suspended sediments lit the beam, since this was lifeless water. She aimed it up next, out of irrational fear that ice would be hanging over them, but again the beam disappeared. At last she shone it down. Nothing was visible. A hundred meters below them lay the rugged seafloor terrain of pillow lavas and tumbled boulders, but the beam did not reach so far.

Relieved, she pushed away from the ark to scan its surface. It was easy to see where *Divernon* had collided with the cliff, since a patch had been scraped clean of the luminous bacteria that made the rest of the craft glow white. She swam in close to run her hand across the surface, smoothing new bacteria onto the injured spot so it would heal. Then she slowly skimmed the circumference of the sphere, checking for scorches and barren spots, till she came to rest on the top, looking out on her world.

In its way, *Divernon* was alive, like a giant cell: a lipid membrane full of organelles designed to feed on the dissolved salts and carbon dioxide of the sea, and process them into amino acids and hydrocarbons to release again. It was part of the metabolic chain that would slowly, over the centuries, turn Ben's sea into a living ocean. The ark was a giant fertilizer, a life-creator, an indispensable part of the Great Work. But out here there was no Great Work. Isolated from its fellows, *Divernon* was a lost soul.

Why *had* no ark ever ventured out here before? Now that her irritation had washed away, the thought flowed into her that Jack was right. For so many generations Bennites had been content to pursue their rounds, following the currents in an ever-renewing cycle. They had never pushed beyond the boundaries of the familiar, out into the places without names.

Suddenly, Osaji ached with homesickness for the familiar floatabout cycle. If they had left Golconda as usual, just now they would be coming to the Swirl, a spot where the great current eddied, bringing many arks together. It was always a festive time; people visited from ark to ark, exchanging gifts and sometimes moving to find more compatible

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crewmates. The arks were gaily decorated, full of music, and there was lighthearted romance and water dancing.

The cold began to seep into her joints, so she kicked off to view the ark from below. As she dove down along the flank of the great globe, the feeling of something looming in the blackness behind her grew, so when she reached bottom she abandoned her inspection and wormed into the aperture as quickly as she could.

She brought a bulb of warm soup for Mota's lunch. When she entered Mota's vacuole, she noticed the stuffy, rank smell of age. She increased the ventilation. The rhythmic expansion and contraction of the air vessels made it sound like the room was breathing.

"Lunch, Mota!" she said in a cheerful tone.

Mota had taken all the clothes from one of the wall pockets, and was busy refolding everything and putting it back. She had done it at least ten times before, and with every repetition the clothes got a little more disordered. She looked up from her work and said anxiously, "Saji, where *were* you? I waited and waited. I thought something had happened to you!"

"I've only been gone an hour," Osaji said, her spirits falling. These reproaches were all she had gotten recently. She knew it would not stop unless she spent every hour of the day in the room. "Come eat your soup." She set it down on the little table they used to take their meals.

Mota looked in agitation at the clothing strewn all over the bed. She picked up a sweater she had just folded, shook it out, then put it down again. "Everything is all out of order," she said.

It was not the clothes that were out of order; it was something inside of Mota's mind. The behavior was simultaneously so unlike her grandmother and so very like her that Osaji felt trapped between laughter, dread, and impatience. Mota had always had a passion for tidiness; cleaning up after other people had been half her life, a way of expressing the love she couldn't put in words. Now it seemed like the trait was betraying her.

"I'll help you after lunch," Osaji said, but suspected that doing the task rather than completing it was what Mota needed.

A little reluctantly, the old woman came to the table and sat sipping her soup from the bulb. Her features looked stiff, her lips a little apart,

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stained with soup. Osaji tried to talk about the ark, but it was hard to keep it up alone. She kept fishing for responses and receiving none.

Suddenly Mota roused and got up restlessly. She started wandering around the room, looking for something in the wall pockets, underneath the bedclothes, in the washvac. After watching a while Osaji said, "What are you looking for?"

Mota paused as if having to search her mind for an answer. "My hand cream," she said at last.

"It's in the washvac, where it always is."

"Yes, of course." Mota went in the washvac, saw where it was, but did not pick it up. She came back out and settled in her chair.

The feeling in Osaji's stomach was much like the homesickness she felt for the Saltese Sea. It was a gnawing feeling that things were wrong, a yearning for a normality that was never coming back. And beneath it all lay buried anger at Mota for letting this confused stranger take over her body. An unworthy feeling.

"Would you like to go for a walk?" Osaji asked.

"No thank you, sweetheart."

"Should I read to you?"

"If you want to," Mota said neutrally.

"I'm asking if *you* want me to." Osaji was unable to keep the desperate impatience from her voice. Mota fell silent. Feeling guilty, Osaji said, "Or would you like to take a nap?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

Mota had only agreed because it would be the least trouble. Nevertheless, Osaji seized upon it. She was feeling claustrophobic in this room, as if the smell was going to hang onto her forever. When she got up, Mota said anxiously, "Are you leaving?"

"Yes, I'm going to let you sleep." She came over and kissed the old woman's hair. Mota took her hand and said, "You're a good girl, Saji."

Controlling her inner rebellion, Osaji said, "Have a good rest, Mota."

When she was outside in the corridor, Osaji punched the wall with her fist, but it only yielded pliantly. "I am *not* a good girl," she said fiercely under her breath. How could Mota look at her — selfish and angry as she was — and say such a thing? It denied the reality of her resentment, and that diminished her. Her own grandmother, who ought to know her better

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than anyone in the world, saw not the individual Osaji but that generic thing, a "good girl." It made her feel like a mannikin, her personality negated.

They drifted steadily westward, across a rocky plain that seemed to have no end. There was no navigation to do. The automated systems kept the ark at a steady depth and scanned for underwater obstacles, but there were none. Osaji made sure the machines were recording *Divernon's* speed and direction; after that there was no need to visit the control pod more than once a day, to make sure nothing had changed. Nothing ever did.

An ark was supposed to work like a symphony, each person playing an indispensable part in the harmonic whole. But Jack made that impossible. He was unpredictable: one day torpid and morose, the next roaming the ark in a restless rage, throwing off sparks. All Osaji's attempts to suggest a useful role for him met a kind of egotistical nihilism.

"What's the point?" he said. "It only puts off the inevitable. We're going to die out here."

"We're going to die no matter where we are," Osaji said.

"Spare me the philosophy. Come on: how long before we run out of food and fuel?"

Puzzled by the question, she said, "Never."

"We can't restock out here."

"We don't need to, except for luxuries. The ark is self-sustaining."

"That's impossible. You would have invented a perpetual motion machine if that were so."

"The ark is not a machine," she protested. "It is not a closed system at all; it's an open one, based on autopoiesis. It's in a state of dynamic equilibrium with the sea. It exchanges chemicals in a chain, a process, that builds up complex molecules from simple ones."

"That's not possible. Not without fuel. The laws of thermodynamics are against it."

"Life violates thermodynamics all the time."

"Until it dies."

Back to that again. "All right, the ark will eventually die," Osaji admitted. "But not until after we do. Unless we don't maintain it. We are part of the system."

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Even that failed to rouse any sense of responsibility in him. There was no alternative: Osaji had to try to do it all herself. And so her days became a numbing rush from one task to the next, never pausing to rest, always dragging her aching body on.

One day, she went to the clinic to get some sleeping medicine for Mota and found the drug supply ransacked. At first she stood staring at the pilfered wall pockets, unable to believe what she saw. Then her outrage boiled over.

She found Jack in the exercise vac, where he often spent time uselessly lifting weights. He was working the bench press with an aggressive intensity when she came in. She stood over him till he put the weights on their rack and sat up. "If it isn't the Guppy Girl," he said.

"It is impossible not to notice that the drugs are missing," she said.

"Oh yeah?"

She waited for him to look guilty, or excuse himself. He did neither. "Such egotism is..." she searched for a truly damning word, "antisocial. How can a man put his own temporary pleasure over the legitimate needs of others? What if one of us gets injured, or ill? You have robbed us of lifesaving cures that — "

"Oh, put a cork in it," Jack said.

Osaji's indignation exceeded her eloquence then. "You are an animal!" she cried. "You have stolen from my grandmother!"

Slowly, he stood up. He had no shirt on, and though he was short and wiry, his muscles were hard like knotted ropes. She took a step backward, for the first time realizing that he could easily overpower her. Fear urged her to flee, but anger made her stand her ground. "You see that tube there?" She pointed to the corridor outside. "On this side of it is yours, on the other side is mine. Don't cross it. If I catch you on my side, I swear I'll do you harm."

She turned and fled then. Stopping in the kitchen, she found a sharp knife. Feeling a little safer, she went to Mota's vac and found the old lady dozing peacefully. Osaji settled down, knife in hand, guarding the aperture.

Never had she faced such a situation. There were always personality conflicts in arks, but the social pressure kept them hidden. But here, for the first time in her life, Osaji was not part of a larger community. She was

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an independent being who needed to protect herself and her grandmother as best she could. Fingering the knife hilt, she hated Jack for making her into that most contemptible of all things, an egotist.

She saw little of Jack in the time that followed. At first, she longed for him to overdose and drop dead, so she could push his body out into the sea and live the rest of her life in peace. But gradually, she began to realize that he had at least been a kind of twisted distraction.

Her days came to revolve around Mota's constant needs for feeding, cleaning, and protection, and her other duties suffered. Immersed in age and infirmity day after day, Osaji herself began to feel dead and shriveled. She slept more than ever before, and woke with aching joints. When she hobbled to the mirror in the morning, she half expected to see white hair.

There was no one day when Mota took a turn for the worse, just a long series of imperceptible declines. It was not so much her hearing and sight failing as her will to hear or see. With her other senses went something Osaji could only describe as her sense of pleasure. No food tasted appealing to Mota, no sensation brought comfort, no activity brought content. Osaji could work until she was exhausted trying to satisfy her, all in vain. Mota's capacity for enjoyment was gone.

Osaji's only refuge was in the hydroponic nursery. Looking after the plants was a chore she actually liked. It took very little effort, but she lavished time on it anyway, because in the nursery she could pretend she wasn't on *Divernon*, or even on Ben.

One day she came as usual to tend the plants. The protective gear was still in the sac by the orifice, meaning no one was inside. She put on the hat, gloves, and dark glasses to shield her from the full-spectrum light, and entered.

Even with the goggles on, she squinted against the brilliance inside. The nursery was a sausage-shaped vesicle with long trays of greenery lining each wall, and a tank down the middle. An adjoining sac held the deep, lightless pool where underwater species grew in a chemical broth that mimicked their natural sea-vent habitat.

She started down the row of greenery, pinching off dead leaves and spraying the plants with nutrient-water. As she parted one thicket of foliage, she noticed something peculiar. On the counter behind the screen

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of plants stood a row of glass jars full of cloudy liquid. They had not been there when she last tended the plants, she was sure. As she reached out to pick one up, a voice behind her grated, "Don't touch that."

Jolted, she whirled around. Jack was sitting on the floor behind her, hidden by a tank.

He raised his hands and said, "Lower your weapon. I surrender."

She realized she was holding the plant sprayer in front of her like a gun, as if to spritz him with water. Ridiculous as it was, she didn't lower it. "What do you want?" she demanded.

Stiffly, he got up. "I want a joint and a ticket out of here, for all the good it does me."

He wasn't wearing any protective gear. She said, "A man should be wearing glasses."

With a harried look he said, "Don't you ever let up?"

"But the radiation is dangerous in here!"

"Don't worry, this is the only room that doesn't seem dim as a dungeon to me."

He took a step forward. She pointed the sprayer at him, and he stopped. "Okay, okay," he said. "Look, we can't go on like this. We're the only two damned people in this ship. We've got to call a cease fire."

Suspicious of this new ploy, she said, "So someone can go on raiding our drugs?"

"I apologize for that." He didn't look apologetic, more like desperately irritated at himself. "The thing is — I'm going bugfuddled crazy. I haven't been clean and sober at the same time in about ten years. It doesn't improve me. That's why — " He nodded at the jars behind her plants.

"What are they?" she said.

"I'm making wine."

Osaji said, "You shouldn't keep them here."

Bitterly sarcastic, he said, "Sorry for polluting your sanctum."

"No, I mean, they won't ferment properly in the light. They should be somewhere dark and cool."

He paused. "I knew that." He came over and gathered the jars off the counter. It seemed like he was about to leave, but he stopped. Then, eyes fixed on something beyond her, he began to talk in a rush, as if he were bleeding words.

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"During the war, I was on a ship called *Viper*. It was a godless piece of junk, really. We used to joke about it, called it the *Vindow Viper*. One day they sent us in to take over a communication station owned by an asteroid-mining company. Only it turned out to be a secret military installation. They blew our piece-of-shit cruiser to bits before we had time to wet our pants. Eleven of us managed to escape in space suits, with only a marker buoy to hang to. We waited there for rescue. You know what it's like in space? It's dark, and your body has no weight. There's nothing to smell, or see, or feel. If you kick, nothing happens. It's just yourself all alone, thinking till your brain echoes like the whole universe.

"We had a big argument while we were waiting for rescue. Some of them thought the oxygen would last longer if we linked our tanks together. I was against it, me and two others. The rest decided to do it, and eventually persuaded everyone but me. It was four days before a ship picked us up. Their oxygen ran out at three and a half. If I'd helped them, I would have died too. I used to think I was the smart one, the lucky one."

Osaji was so taken aback she forgot to point the sprayer at him.

"Look," he said, "I came to this godforsaken planet to shed my self like an old dirty T-shirt into the laundry. I was hunting for a clean break. I wanted to be a new person, but the old person sticks to me like a bad smell. My past is something I stepped in long ago and can't get off my shoe."

This only made Osaji's own self-pity well up to match his. "You are not the only one trapped here unwillingly. Do you think I do all this work for pleasure? Do you think I want to maintain this ark and wash and dress and feed someone as if I were some kind of appliance? No one would choose this. It is degrading."

Finally he seemed to focus on her. "Then for God's sake, give me something to do! If I have to sit around thinking any more, I'm going to start chewing my leg off."

Suspicious at this change, she said, "What can a spacer do?"

"I don't know. Teach me, while I still have a few brain cells left alive."

It came to her then: the job she most wanted rid of. "I can teach the spacer to go outside."

To her surprise, he blanched. "No, you don't want me out there. I'd just be a drag on you."

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"Our breathers are easier to use than yours. You don't have to carry oxygen; the breather extracts it from the water. And it's not like space. When you kick, something happens."

"Listen," he said, "I've got to tell you something. Truth is, I was a complete screwup as a spacer. You see, I couldn't turn off my mind. I couldn't stop thinking of consequences, and caring about them. I couldn't stop seeing the danger, and the stupidity, and the venality, and the faces...."

He had wandered off again, into some haunted territory of his mind. To pull him back, she said, "There are no faces in the sea. No venality either."

With a hoarse laugh he said, "Well, that leaves danger and stupidity."

"Only if you bring them."

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" he said.

5. THROUGH SHADOW VALLEY

THE APERTURE to the outside was located in the floor at the very bottom of the globe. The trick to getting through it was, once suited up, to take a little leap and plunge in feet first, as if jumping into a pool. Osaji had never thought of it as a skill till she watched Jack trying to follow her out. He got stuck halfway, struggling ineptly and letting air escape in big bubbles that rolled up the ark's side. Trying not to laugh, Osaji grasped one flailing ankle and gave a sharp tug, ignoring the curses emanating from her radio earpiece.

He was awkward and jerky in the water, and she had to make him swim to and fro a while to get the hang of the flippers. Then she took him on a tour of the ark's exterior, showing him the emergency entry pores and the scars of their encounter with the heat plumes and the mountain.

With Jack beside her, the darkness no longer seemed so oppressive. It gave her the courage to do something she had not contemplated in a long time: gather water samples. They had to be taken at some distance, to avoid contamination from the cloud of organic molecules the ark gave off.

As soon as they left the sheltering bulge of the ark, they were enveloped in a dark so inky that all direction disappeared. Osaji stripped

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the covers from the phosphor patches on her suit so Jack could see where she was. She turned back to show him how to do the same, but he had already figured it out.

Though they swam slowly, the ark soon dwindled to a dim ball behind. It was icy cold. Jack switched on the searchlamp, but the beam just disappeared into water in every direction. They seemed suspended in nothingness.

Jack muttered, "A dark illimitable ocean without bound, where length, breadth, time and place are lost."

"What does that mean?" Osaji asked.

"It's poetry, kid. Damn spooky, that's what it means."

Osaji took the sampling bottle from the pack at her belt and held it out at arm's length as she swam, releasing the cap. As she was covering it again, something touched her face.

She gave a startled exclamation, and was suddenly blinded by the light as Jack turned it on her. "What is it?" he said.

"Turn that off!"

He did, but light still danced before her dazzled eyes. For a terrifying moment, she couldn't even tell up from down. She blinked until the dim glow of Jack's phosphor patches swam into view. "Can you see the ark?" she said.

"Right there," he said, presumably pointing with an invisible arm.

She saw it then as well, dimly, farther off than it should be. But as she started for it, Jack said, "Hey, where are you going?"

The photism she had been following vanished, and as she turned, the real *Divernon* swam into view. If he had not been there to stop her, she might have wandered off, chasing a mirage.

"Let's go back," she said, rattled.

They raced back as fast as they could swim. When they were inside again, he said, "What the hell happened out there?"

"This swimmer thought she felt a heat tendril."

"What's that?"

"A current of warmer water. No one else felt it?"

"Warm! You've got to be kidding."

"It must have been an illusion, then."

Still, she went to check the ark's temperature records. They were

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disappointingly flat. She had to tamp down the tiny updraft of hope that it had been a hint of geothermal activity. Another rift zone would mean a site for colonization — an energy source for life.

She couldn't entirely suppress the thought. The currents here were robust. They had to be driven by something. Just the possibility was like an infusion of energy. She felt buoyant and excited as she went to check on Mota, like the little girl she had once been, running to tell her grandmother of some discovery.

Mota roused from an open-eyed doze and smiled sweetly when Osaji told her what had just happened. "That's nice, dear," she said. Stiffly, she rose from her chair, and Osaji saw that the back of her dress was soaked.

"Mota, you've wet yourself," she said, shocked.

"No, I haven't," Mota said, turning so Osaji couldn't see it.

"Here, I'll help you change." Osaji tried to make her voice neutral.

"No, no," Mota said, "don't worry. I can do it myself." She stood looking around uncertainly, as if she had never seen the room before. Silently, Osaji went to the wall pocket and found some dry clothes. She felt irrationally humiliated by this new infirmity. It was so unlike Mota.

Mota took a long time changing clothes in the washvac. Osaji sat at the table, all at once too enervated to move. Her bubble of high spirits was leaking air, and she was sinking into stagnant water again.

The trip outside revived Jack's fund of hare-brained schemes. "What if we were to rig a really big antenna?" he said. "Maybe we could generate a low-frequency signal that could penetrate all this water and ice."

Osaji was skeptical that any length of antenna would help them, but it did no harm to try. So she helped him string floats on a braided carbon-steel mooring line and paid it out into the water. Before long *Divernon* was trailing a long tail of wire.

It did not improve their communications. The radio still hissed white noise. But the antenna did succeed in an unexpected way.

As the current carried them inexorably westward, the seafloor landscape became more rugged. The sonar showed the hunched shoulders of hills below them, concealed by inky water. Then one day the bottom dropped out of the world.

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On a routine check of the control pod, Osaji was startled to see no sonar reading at all. Going back to check the record, she found that the soundings had stopped only two hours before. When a diagnostic turned up no problem with the equipment, she came to the only plausible conclusion: they had been swept over the edge of an underwater chasm. The ark was caught in a gentle eddy, and as it floated backward her conjecture was confirmed, for the sonar picked up the edge of fluted organ-pipe cliffs dropping away into darkness so deep the signal could not reach the bottom.

By then, she and Jack were both watching the screen, mesmerized. "What should we do?" Osaji asked. It was the first navigation decision they had had to make.

"What are the options?" Jack said.

"We could go down, or stay at our present depth. If we stay, we'll probably pick up the westward current again. If we drop down...."

"Yes?" he prompted when she failed to continue.

"Well, there is no telling. There might be no current down there. Then we would just come up again. There might be a current that would sweep us some place we don't want to be."

"As opposed to now?" Jack said ironically.

"That is a point."

Often, decisions like this took hours, because everyone was afraid to be first to voice an opinion, and they talked until a consensus emerged without anyone having to say it aloud. But Jack suffered no inhibitions about expressing himself. "I say go for it. Take the plunge," he said. "What good are we doing out here if we don't take time to see the sights?"

She smiled at him, because she agreed.

He stared at her open-mouthed till she said, "Is something wrong?"

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile before," he said.

That made her feel self-conscious, so she turned to the controls and input the sequence of commands that would take them downward.

As soon as they dropped below the edge of the cliff, they lost their current. They were close enough to the cliff that the side-sounding sonar could show an image of the stately columns of basalt plunging into unknowable depths below. Osaji pushed back her chair and rose.

"Where are you going?" Jack said.

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"It will take a long time to sink," she said. "We have to adjust to the pressure as we go down. It could be hours."

He couldn't tear himself from the screens, so she left him there, watching.

In the end, it took three days. As they descended, the water temperature slowly rose one degree, and Osaji's hopes rose with it. When the sonar finally picked up the bottom, they both sat watching the screen intently while the detail improved scan by scan. What it showed was only another tumbled slope of boulders leading down to a rumpled seafloor. "Look at the edges of the rocks," Osaji said, pointing at the screen. "They are sharp, not eroded. That means this area could be geologically active."

But they saw nothing else in any way remarkable.

They did pick up a new current, sweeping them slowly north along the line of the cliffs. The next day, the side sonar picked up another trace opposite them — the other side of the canyon, closing in fast. As the gorge became narrower, the current sped up, and Osaji began to fear that the gap would become too narrow for them to pass.

"What should we do?" she said.

"Ride it out, I guess," Jack said, his eyes glued to the monitors. "Like whitewater ballooning. Yee-ha."

Soon the giant cliffs were marching by, close on either side. For a moment the sonars showed nothing but rock in every direction — they were being swept around a curve. A gap appeared ahead. They were heading toward it.

Then all motion seemed to stop. The cliffs were behind them. They had entered onto the floor of a dark, hidden valley.

At first it seemed that they had just exchanged one lightless wasteland for another. Day by day they traveled northwest, their rocky surroundings unchanged. But there was a difference: as if they had passed a wall severing them forever from home.

Even Mota seemed to be drifting into another world Osaji could not enter, or imagine. As her memory failed, the old woman lost her ability to detect a sequence of events, to tell the *before* from the *after*; and with sequence gone, time itself disappeared. At first her own confusion frightened her, and she asked constantly what time it was, as if to force her

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experiences into order. But as she grew accustomed to it, she learned to exist in a bath of time where all the past was present simultaneously. She began to confuse Osaji with long-dead people from her childhood. Whenever it happened, Osaji corrected her more sharply than she should have; but she couldn't help it. The reaction came from deep down, like the reflex to breathe, or defend her life — except it was her individuality she was defending. As Mota's failing senses saw her less and less distinctly, Osaji felt like she was disappearing, turning invisible as water.

She was in Mota's vac when a shudder and a jerk went through the ark. "Did you feel that?" she said.

"What, dear?"

Osaji was very attuned to *Divernon*'s motions by now, and knew something was amiss. There was a faint rushing sound that seemed to come from everywhere at once. She sprinted up to the control pod, arriving only moments before Jack did. "*You* felt it," she said, forgetting to be polite.

"Damn straight I did."

Osaji's biggest fear, that they had collided with something, turned out not to be true. *Divernon* had come to a sudden halt in mid-stream. The sound she heard was water flowing past the membrane.

"The antenna!" Jack said.

Osaji had forgotten all about it. She saw now what he meant: one or more of the floats must have come loose and allowed the line to sink. They had been dragging a line along the seafloor, and now it was caught on something.

"We should have brought it in long ago," Osaji said, reproaching herself for irresponsibility. "Now we will lose a good mooring cable. We will have to cut it away."

"Well, maybe we can salvage part of it," Jack said.

"Do you think someone would be willing to go out there to cut it?"

"Not by myself," Jack said. "I'd go with you."

They planned it out carefully this time, since there would be more risk than their last job had entailed. The combination of tether and current had brought *Divernon* down closer to the bottom than it ought to be, and as soon as it was freed it would float up. They needed to be sure not to lose it.

The water was noticeably warmer to Osaji. It was, of course, just as

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black. Lit by their headlamps, the mooring cable stretched taut, a straight line leading diagonally downward, punctuated by floats every few yards. They set out, swimming along it. The farther they went before cutting it, the more of it they would be able to salvage.

The ark disappeared into the darkness behind them. Osaji noticed that she could now see the narrow beam of light from her headlamp; there was something dissolved in the water. For some reason, she did not want to get close to the bottom. The thought of monstrous rock shapes below her, hidden since the beginning of eternity, filled her with dread. She was about to suggest that they had come far enough and should cut the cable when Jack said, "What's that?"

"What?" she said, drawing in her feet out of fear that they would touch something.

"Turn on the searchlight," he said.

When she did, she gasped.

They were surrounded by glass towers. Not solid glass, but intricate meshworks of spun filaments that glinted silver and azure in the beam of Osaji's light. As the searchlight touched the nearest ones, they seemed to ignite in a cascade, as if conducting the light from one glass strand to the next, till the entire landscape around them glowed. Latticework turrets towered over them, gazebos and arcades of glistering mesh lay below. In the distance, some were broken and toppled, but the ones nearby looked perfectly preserved. It was like a city of hoarfrost, magnified to the size of monuments.

As her light played over the intricate structures, Osaji could not help the impression that it was a sort of architecture, created by design. But what strange intelligence would have built a monument down here, in a lightless gulf where no one would ever see it?

Even Jack at her side, after an initial exhalation of astonishment, was awed into silence. He slowly swam forward, and Osaji followed, drawn to touch, to be *in* the tracery sculpture, to see it from every angle.

They glided through arches that dwarfed them, down a tube woven of glowing geometric webs, and looked up from inside an open spiral that towered into the black water sky. They swam along lacework corridors, into honeycomb spheres of overlapping glass threads. Nowhere was there any sign of life. Not a thing moved but themselves.

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In a glowing, cathedral-like space they found three hexagonal glass pillars, of uneven heights, whose surfaces were inscribed with patterns like worm tracks. Jack swam around the cluster of stelae, then said what Osaji was thinking: "Do you suppose it's writing?"

"I don't know. We ought to record it."

All thought of cutting the mooring line was gone now. It had been a stroke of the most astonishing luck that it had caught just here. They swam back toward it, chilled and eager to fetch some recording devices.

When they emerged into the womb of the ark and stripped off their diving gear, the awe that had held them in silence broke, and Jack let out a whoop of exhilaration. "Holy crap, that was the most amazing thing I've ever seen. Who do you think they were?"

He was leaping to the assumption that Osaji had tried cautiously to suppress. "It did not look natural," she admitted. "But it might have been a coral or something similar."

"Great big humping underwater spiders," Jack speculated. "But spiders that could read and write. Where's the camera?"

Osaji was rubbing her feet, which were the color and temperature of oysters. "We ought to warm up before going back. If one of us could heat some soup, the other will find the camera."

They were about to split up when the ark gave a shudder and moved. The cable was slipping. "No!" Jack shouted at it. "Don't give way!"

It was too late. There was a jerk, then suddenly the ark was rising, floating free again.

Jack let out a stream of profanity more heartfelt than any Osaji had heard from him. "Can't we drop an anchor?" he said. Osaji leaped to draw in the line, but long before they managed to attach an anchor to it, they both knew their chance was gone. The ark had floated on, and they were left with nothing but their memory of what they had seen.

That evening Osaji came down from the control pod, where she had been studying the sonar readings to see if they had recorded evidence of the glass city, to find Jack and Mota together in the kitchen.

"Mota!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, dear," Mota said brightly. "Do you remember Yamada?"

Osaji felt embarrassed that Jack had seen Mota so confused, and was

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about to usher her back to her vac when he stopped her. "We've been having an interesting conversation. How come you've been hiding away this charming lady?"

Mota giggled like a girl.

Osaji stared at Jack, suspicious that he was mocking both Mota and her.

"She's been telling me about one round when a man named Sabo transferred from her ark to another one," Jack said, then turned to Mota. "So what happened next?"

She looked confused. "Oh, nothing in particular."

It was like most of Mota's stories these days; they trailed off into pointlessness. Osaji stirred restlessly, wanting to get Mota away.

"I see," Jack said. "Well, more power to Sabo. I say that's how a man ought to act."

Mota beamed at him fondly. He leaned over and whispered to Osaji, "Who the hell is Yamada?"

"Her brother. My great-uncle," Osaji said.

"Bit of a scapegrace, I take it?"

Osaji nodded. "He was her favorite sibling."

"I'm honored to be him," he said, and rose to fetch a bottle from a cupboard. "In view of the occasion, I think we ought to have some wine."

"It's too soon," Osaji warned him. "It will taste awful."

"Then it should suit me nicely," he said, and broke the seal. She watched him pour some into a glass. He smelled it and winced, then took a mouthful and downed it. He grimaced, then glared at the glass resentfully.

"It is vile, true?" Osaji said.

"On the contrary," he said. "It's a belligerent little vintage with a sarcastic attitude. I like it very much." He took another swig.

Osaji took down a glass and held it out. Jack poured her a glassful, and she took a sip. It was vinegary and revolting.

"Care for some?" Jack asked Mota.

"Oh, don't give it to her," Osaji said.

"She wants some. An adventurous spirit, I see," he said, and poured her a tiny amount. She sipped, and made a sour face. Jack laughed. "You're never going to trust me again now, are you?"

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"You're always playing jokes on me," Mota said with mock severity.

"Come on, Mota, this man is a bad influence," Osaji said, rising.

"Bring her back soon. I'll turn her into a lush yet."

"Not with that wine," Osaji said.

When she had gotten Mota safely back to her vac, Osaji returned to the kitchen. Jack was studying the sonar printouts she had brought down from the control pod. They showed next to nothing. The glass structures had been too fragile and airy to give a clear return.

"I'd think I had imagined the whole thing, if you hadn't seen it too," Jack said.

"Even if we ever get back, no one will believe us."

They continued drinking the wine in silence.

Osaji felt as if a vast weight of sadness were hanging above her, pressing inward, making it hard to breathe. "Jack," she said, "we ought to make an effort to remember. Think of those people, or whatever they were, who built the city. They created all that, and now they are forgotten, so forgotten it's as if they never existed. And now we don't even have any proof we saw the city they made. We owe it to them to remember, to make them real. It's the least we can do."

He gave a slight, bitter smile. "As if we mattered ourselves."

She saw what he meant. They were next to forgotten as well. The farther they traveled from home, the less they would be remembered. No doubt they were already given up for lost; soon they would drift farther and farther into the night, until all trace of their existence disappeared. Nothing would remain in the end.

"If everyone has forgotten us, do you suppose we'll still exist?" Osaji said.

He stirred restlessly. "You don't have enough to forget. Try living a life like mine. You'll know then, memory's a disease."

He was silent a while, and she thought he was going to say no more, but he went on, "If those city builders thought they'd be remembered, they were crazy. Forgetting is what nature does best. The universe is a huge forgetting machine. It erases information no matter how hard we try to hang onto it. How could it be any different? What if the memory of everything that ever happened still existed? The universe would be clogged with information, so packed with it we couldn't move. We'd be

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paralyzed, because every moment we ever lived would still be with us. It would be hell."

Osaji thought of Mota, in whom memory was the most evanescent thing of all. Already Osaji existed only fleetingly for Mota, and Jack was not even a separate person, only the shadow of the long-dead Yamada. And soon Mota, then all of them, would arrive at the ultimate forgetting toward which they were traveling. They were all swimming temporarily in a sea of darkness, and then they would be gone.

The sadness pressed in, crushing her. Her eyes were tightly closed, but seawater was leaking from them anyway. It was for the lost city, for poor *Divernon*, for Mota, and for herself, the most futile of them all.

Jack reached across the table and took her hand. "Don't listen to me, kid. I don't think I'm going to forget you. Not a chance."

She clutched his hand as if he were the only thing that made her real.

6. GARDEN OF THE DEEP

IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE for Osaji to keep Mota and Jack apart in the weeks that followed. Whenever Osaji's back was turned, Mota would creep out looking for him, and when she found him he teased her, told her inappropriate jokes, and fed her the sweet treats that were the only food she really craved. She would sit in the kitchen playing hostess to him, so polite that only Osaji could tell it was play-acting, like a little girl pretending to be an adult. Gradually, Osaji learned to stop resenting it.

As they traveled, she reduced the ark's cruising depth and pored over the sensor readings in hopes of finding another underwater city. Though they now kept an anchor ready to drop on a moment's notice, she saw no hint of anything but barren rock and rumpled lava on the seafloor.

Then one day the water temperature shot up. When she discovered it, Osaji consulted the sonar, but the images were fuzzy and hard to interpret. She went to find Jack. "I think a man should check to see what's outside," she said.

"Why a man?" he said, to be irritating.

"Because someone else needs to be inside ready to throw the anchor out."

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They both went down to the hatch pod. Only seconds after he disappeared through the aperture, her radio earpiece started emitting ear-blistering vulgarities.

"What is it?" she asked.

There was no answer for several seconds. Then, "There's *light* out here."

The thought that there might be erupting lava made her hopeful. Then the more likely explanation occurred to her. "You mean the ark?"

"Well, yes, it's glowing like gangbusters. But I meant the trees."

"*Trees?*"

"There's a prigging forest out here!"

"Should one drop the anchor?"

"Yes! Then get your ass out here. No offense."

When she emerged from the ark, the sight struck her dumb. The ark hovered over an undulating landscape of dimly glowing lifeforms that covered the seafloor thickly in every direction, till they disappeared on the dark horizon. When she trained the searchlamp on them, the greenish phosphor glow disappeared and the biotic canopy proved to be made up of pinkish fronds gently undulating in the current, attached to tall stalks that looked in every way like tree trunks, except that they were larger than any tree she had seen.

Osaji and Jack swam down till they were hovering over the fronds, and could see their scale. The central rib of each branch was twenty to thirty feet long, and the splayed-out fern covered an area as wide as *Divernon*'s diameter. Jack reached out to touch the nearest one, and with a violent jerk the whole thing retracted into its tube, leaving behind a cloud of disturbed water. Several adjacent brushtops retracted as well.

"They are tubeworms!" Osaji said in astonishment. But tubeworms of a size she had never dreamed of.

"What do they eat?" Jack said, still rattled by the violent reaction he had stimulated.

"Not us. They are filter feeders. But it would be easy to get pulled down into the tube and crushed."

"You're telling me."

They swam down into the space thus cleared. Below the palmlike tops, the tubes were ribbed and hard, and so wide around that Osaji and

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Jack could not span them with their arms, even by linking hands. The trunks were crusted with orange and yellow growths that looked for all the world like fungus — except when touched, they moved.

Osaji felt something brush her face, but could see nothing. "Turn off your light a moment," she said. When Jack complied, they found themselves in a wholly different world. The water under the tubeworm canopy was alive with glowing filaments that outlined segmented bodies, hourglass-shaped bags, lacy things like floating doilies, others like paintbrushes or fringed croissants. It was as if the trees were strung with optic fiber ornaments, or fireflies in formation. When Osaji switched her light on again, they all disappeared. "Jellies!" she said. "The light goes right through them."

Lower down, there was a dense undergrowth that showed a riot of colors in their lights. There were frilly orchidlike things, huge bushes of feathers, clusters of translucent orange bottles, in one place a fan lazily waving to and fro, stirring the still water. "Look, your spiders!" Osaji called out, training her light on a china-white creature with six spindly legs, picking its way over a thing that looked like a brain.

When they turned around at last, Jack swam ahead, with Osaji lighting the way. She barely saw the thing that came arrowing out of the darkness at him. It hit him in the chest and drove him backward through the water so fast that Osaji lost him for a moment. With panic pounding in her ears, she swept her light around and saw him, seemingly impaled on a tubeworm trunk with a thrashing, snakelike body attached to his chest. She churned through the water toward him, and with no weapon but her light, she gave the creature a blow. It did not let go or cease whipping its paddle-shaped tail. Jack now had ahold of it and was trying to pull it away, a maneuver that would almost surely tear his suit. She grasped the paddletail near the front and squeezed with all her strength. It took what seemed like minutes, but the creature finally went limp and let go. She shone her light on it. It had no head, just a giant sucker where a mouth should be. With an exclamation of revulsion, she threw it away and it floated downward into the blackness.

"Is your suit all right?" she said, inspecting the place where the paddletail had attached. To make sure, she took some repair goo from her utility belt and smeared it on.

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"Never mind the suit. What about *me*?" Jack said irritably.

"Are you all right?"

"Some wear and tear, thanks for asking."

"Let's get back."

They could see the ark through the branches above, like a bright full moon. Its bioluminescent bacteria were thriving in this nutrient-rich water. When they were inside, she inspected the bruise on Jack's chest but determined that no ribs were broken. "We need to be more careful," she said.

"You have a way with understatement," he answered.

They spent three days documenting the new world they had discovered before floating on. At first they stayed outside a great deal as they floated, anxious not to miss anything; then Jack figured out how to rig a camera on the outside of the ark so they could watch from the comfort of the control pod. Osaji marveled that she had never thought of such a thing — but then, in the Saltese Sea there was nothing to see outside and no light to see it by anyway. Everything there was focused inward.

The underwater woodland of tube worms slowly gave way to a wide plain of sea grass. They sat atop the ark and watched the glowing prairie undulate in the currents, while their light beams picked out raylike creatures circling in the updrafts above. One day there was a shower of mineral particles. Pebble-sized bits pattered around them like raindrops, and soon a mist of smaller ash descended. It was what was fertilizing this oasis of life.

Eventually the land began to rise and they saw the first of the smoker chimneys belching out thick clouds of steam and dissolved minerals from deep within the planet's crust. Here, a spiny red growth dominated the ecosystem, like a branched bottle brush the size of a tower. In the sediment below the spine trees grew blooming fields of small tubeworms like chrysanthemums and daisies, and enigmatic things shaped like mesh stockings. They saw many more of the whiplike paddletails, always swimming upstream in the direction opposite to the one the ark was floating. Occasionally, some of the brainless things would attach to the downstream side of the ark, their tails still paddling frantically as if to push the ark against the current. Then Osaji and Jack would have to go outside and weed the ark.

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What they never saw, though they looked all the time, was any evidence of the species that had built the glass city.

"I don't get this," Jack said. "We find a city with no life, and life with no city."

Osaji wanted to be outside all the time now. The ark's interior seemed drab and claustrophobic, and she rushed through her duties there to get into the water again.

They were moored on the edge of a mazy badlands of extinct smokers, their sides streaked like candles with brightly colored deposits of copper, sulphur, and iron, when the accident happened. Osaji was preparing to go outside when she bustled into Mota's vac and found the old lady lying on the floor, conscious but unable to speak. Panicky, Osaji knelt beside her. "Mota, what happened?"

Mota only looked up with round, watery eyes. Her mouth worked; nothing came out but a thin line of saliva. It filled Osaji with horror to see her grandmother so robbed of humanity. She jumped up and raced out to find Jack.

When they tried to move Mota to the bed, she groaned in pain, her eyes wild and staring. "She's probably broken something," Jack said.

"What can we do?" Osaji said.

"Not a lot," Jack said grimly. "Make her comfortable. Wait here, I'll be right back."

He disappeared. Osaji sat on the floor holding Mota's hand. Mota gripped back, hanging on as if a strong current were sweeping her from the world. "We'll try to do something for you, Mota," Osaji said. "Just relax, don't worry."

Jack came back with a little sack of pills. "Here, see if she can swallow this," he said.

"What is it?" Osaji frowned at the pill he handed her.

"Codeine," he said.

So he hadn't consumed all of them. She glanced at him, but he had turned away.

She managed to get Mota to swallow the pill and wash it down from a cup with a straw. Almost at once, far quicker than the drug could have taken effect, Mota closed her eyes and relaxed. They waited till they were sure she was asleep, then moved her onto the bed.

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When they had done all they could, Jack said, "You want me to leave or stay?"

At first Osaji was unsure of what she wanted. Then at last she said, "Stay."

So began a long ordeal of waiting. From time to time Mota would rouse and reach out for one of them; it didn't seem to matter which one. As Osaji sat looking at Mota's face, she was forced to think: I longed to be free of her, yet now I don't want her to die.

More than anyone Osaji knew, Mota had forsaken her own wants in order to live for others. Selflessness. It was a virtue; everyone said so. And yet, it was as if her individuality had slowly withered away from neglect over the years. She had spent a lifetime making herself transparent, till she had no substance of her own, and all you saw was the substance of others seen through her.

As Osaji studied Mota's face, it seemed impossible that those mild and vacant features had ever known obsession, rage, or remorse. Had Mota ever believed deeply in something, or taken risks? She had never spoken of herself — never even known herself, perhaps. Now she never would.

"She doesn't deserve this," Osaji said softly.

After a few seconds, Jack said, "No one does. But we all get it, in the end."

"I mean, to die out here, so far from everyone else. She lived for other people. Without them, there's nothing left of her."

There was a long silence. At last Jack said, "Just to warn you, this takes a long time. It's messy and hard. People fight it. Even her."

He was right. She struggled painfully against the ebbing of her life. Osaji and Jack took turns sitting with her and giving her medicine when she roused. They were soon worn out, but still she hung on. At the very end she looked up at Osaji, and seemed to recognize her. "Why is it so dark?" she said.

"Don't worry about it, Mota. We're right here with you."

Her hand contracted around Osaji's, and she said, "I wish...."

Osaji never found out what she wished.

Osaji dressed Mota's body in her favorite clothes and they wrapped her in one of the weighted nets used for burial in the Saltese Sea. At home, they would have laid her among barren rocks to nourish the microorganisms,

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so she could become mother to all the life that followed. Here, they laid her in a spot that was already like a garden: a cushiony bed of tubeworm flowers. Then they raised the anchor and floated on.

It was the next day before the grief came. Osaji had gone to Mota's vac to clean up, and found in one of the wall pockets a sweater that Mota had worn till it was the shape of her. When Osaji held it up, it seemed so empty, and yet still full of her. She hugged it tight, and it gave off the smell of love.

All at once, Osaji missed Mota so intensely her throat squeezed tight around her breath, and around her heart, and tears pried their way out between her eyelids. She knew then she had lost the only person who would ever love her just for being herself. It was the only *inadvertent* love she would ever know — love as deep as the genes that knit them together. There would never be anyone else who simply *had* to love her.

They had come to a place where, far away through the water, they could see the flickering light of eruptions from a line of undersea volcanoes. They went outside to sit on top of the ark and watch.

"Do you believe in an afterlife?" Osaji said.

Jack paused, as if considering whether to lie. At last he said, "No."

"So when we die, that's the end?"

"We can only hope." After a few seconds he added, "Sorry. I ought to give you comforting platitudes, I suppose."

"No. I hope death is the end, too. Because if Mota knew we'd left her so far from everything familiar, she'd feel lost and scared forever."

A paddletail shot past them, swimming upstream. "Where do you suppose they're going?" Osaji said.

"Nowhere. They're just crazy. Always swimming against the current, as if — " Suddenly, he stopped.

"What?" she said.

"I've got an idea."

It was as crazy as all his other ideas. But at least it didn't require technology they didn't have, or skills they couldn't acquire. It wasn't a spacer idea, it was a Bennish idea.

They set about gathering paddletails. They used sheets of plastic scavenged from inside the ark — vat covers, tarpaulins, anything that could be spared. They spread them wide to catch the creatures speeding past. Once affixed to a surface, the paddletails held on tenaciously, still

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whipping their tails against the current. As their numbers increased, Osaji and Jack repositioned some to the upstream side of the ark, where they strained against the lines holding them as if they were in harness. Others went to the downstream side to push against the ark like so many flailing motors.

The moment when *Divernon* started moving slowly against the current, Osaji and Jack slapped each other's hands in triumph, then swam to catch up with the ark.

For many days they experimented and refined the rigging before they were satisfied with the way their herd of snakes was deployed. It looked absurd, as if their washing were spread out in a tattered array all around the ark. But it pulled them slowly, inexorably, backward the way they had come.

They still couldn't steer, of course. The paddletails would go only one direction, upstream. But if they kept going long enough, they would take *Divernon* home.

Back they went, over the seagrass plains, past the tubeworm jungle. Every day Osaji went to the control pod to search for the best current — strong enough to keep the paddletails going, weak enough not to overpower them. Every day she and Jack went outside to catch more, fearful their present herd would die. In a few weeks they began to discover eggs embedded in the rough outer membrane of the ark, the spawn of their captives. Uncertain of the paddletail life cycle, they gathered some to raise in one of their tanks and left the rest to hatch outside, in hopes that the creatures' instincts would bring them back to spawn in the place where they were born.

They must have passed the glass city, but they did not see it and could not stop to search. They rose up over the edge of the rift valley and into the primeval waste with some misgiving. The current was much gentler here, so they made better headway; but the paddletails did not thrive. Carefully they nursed along their second generation, experimenting to see what they ate. One day, having tried everything else, Jack poured some of his home-brewed rotgut into their tank, and they went into a frenzy trying to drink it.

"Kindred souls!" he whooped. "They need to be plastered to stay alive!"

After that, Osaji and Jack devoted as much biomass as they could

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spare to the production of alcohol. Across the dark plain, *Divernon* became like a floating distillery. "At least *something* around here is lit," Jack observed.

Despite their best efforts, their creatures were much depleted by the time the sonar began to show the outline of mountains ahead. Remembering the strength of the current that had swept them through the gap, Osaji worried that their paddletail propulsion system wouldn't have the power to get them through. She and Jack were both in the control pod when they made the first attempt. The paddletails pulled them unerringly toward the pass where the current flowed strongest; but as the water velocity increased, the ark slowed. Barely a hundred yards from the gap, they came to a complete stop. The paddletails, pushing as hard as they could, could not draw them through.

"We've got to drop down out of the current," Osaji said. "They can't do it. We're going to wear them out."

"Wait," Jack said, looking at the screen. "What's that above us?"

"The ice," Osaji said, dread in her heart. Here, at the mountain pass, it was perilously close.

"Go up," he said.

She shook her head. "We could get trapped." People had warned of it all her life.

"It's our only choice," he said.

So, quelling her fear, she input the command that would dump ballast water from the tank and send them slowly upward.

As they rose, she watched the image of the ice's underside grow clearer on the screen. It was not smooth, but carved into channels, with knifelike ridges projecting down like the keels of enormous, frozen boats. The water temperature was falling. The cold made the paddletails sluggish; soon they would cease to pull. "This isn't going to work," Osaji said softly.

"Hang on," Jack said.

They were almost close enough to touch the ice when they felt the stirring of a countercurrent flowing east. The paddletails, paralyzed with cold, did not respond. *Divernon* started floating toward the mountains again, this time swept on the breath of the sea.

Ahead, the sonar showed that the ice and the mountain peaks converged. "Get into one of those channels in the ice," Jack suggested.

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"But what if — "

"Just try it, for chrissake! What have we got to lose?"

They entered a deep cleft with ice walls on either side. As the mountains rose to block their way, a floor formed beneath them, cutting them off from below. Now, there was no longer an option of dropping back down. They were in a tunnel of ice and rock. Ahead, the walls closed in. They felt a gentle jostle, then heard the sound of water rushing past the membrane.

Divernon had come to a stop in the stream. The passage was too narrow, and they were stuck.

They sat motionless for a few moments. Then Jack said, "Sorry."

"No!" Osaji said. "We can't give up now. I'm going to vent air. Maybe it will push us past this narrow spot."

The first jet of air had no effect. "Keep going," Jack said. "Less air, smaller balloon. Maybe it'll shrink us down to size."

They had vented an alarming amount when *Divernon* stirred, slipped, and then floated on down the tunnel. Two hundred yards beyond, the floor fell out from beneath them again. Eager to escape the entrapping ice, Osaji commanded the ark to begin a descent. A valley opened up before them, and the navigational station that had gone dead months before suddenly came to life. "It's recognized where we are!" Osaji cried out. "We're back in the Saltese Sea!"

The map on the screen showed that they had returned over the mountain range barely twenty miles from the place where they had left it, close to the Cleft of Golconda. No longer were there any boiling plumes; far below them, the familiar currents had resumed. There was even a scattering of dots for the beacons of an arkswarm. Osaji seized the radio and put out a call.

"Any ark, this is *Divernon*. Please respond."

There was silence. She repeated the call.

A crackly, faraway voice came from the speaker. "Which ark is that? Please repeat your call."

"It's *Divernon!*" Osaji nearly shouted.

"*Divernon?*" There was a pause. "Where are you?"

"Above you, just under the ice. We've just come back over the mountains. We were swept across when Golconda erupted, but we made it back."

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There were some staticky sounds from the radio that might have been exclamations of surprise, or a conversation on the other end, or merely interference.

"*Divernon*, did you say mountains?" the radio finally said. "We can't have heard you right. Please repeat."

7. BREAKING FREE

THEY REPEATED their story many times in the hours, and finally days, that followed, as they sank back into the inhabited depths and the radio communication improved. They learned that the seafloor station at Golconda had not been utterly destroyed. Though the main dome had collapsed in the earthquake, and the port facilities had been severely damaged, the auxiliary domes had survived, and now the main one was being rebuilt. Through a friend of a friend, Osaji even learned that Kitti and her family were all right.

"She will be very surprised to see her sister again," the woman said over the radio. "The name of Osaji was listed among the casualties."

The paddletails revived as they sank into warmer water, and started towing them upstream again. Since this would take the ark by the fastest route to Golconda, they let them continue. Osaji relished the idea of arriving pulled by a snakeherd in their makeshift harnesses.

As they neared the station, Osaji dutifully started to pack and clean in order to vacate their purloined vessel. She had not entered Mota's vacuole since they had started the journey home. It was just as she had left it. Hardening herself against the memories, Osaji started to fill a recycling bin with the possessions of Mota's lifetime. She was standing with Uncle Yamada's flute in her hand when Jack peered in.

"Do you suppose anyone would value Yamada's flute?" she said.

He came in and took the flute, but gave it back. "Not like you would," he said.

"I can't keep it," she said. "Someone else will use this vac next round. One must clear everything away so the next round can begin." She stuffed the flute in the trash.

"I'll take it, then," Jack said, and fished it out.

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"Does it play?" she asked.

He blew over the airhole and it let out a protesting squawk. "I guess I'll have to learn how," he said. "Or Yamada will haunt me."

He looked around the small bubble. "She was a nice lady. Not at all like you." Realizing what he'd said, he winced. "That's not what I meant."

Osaji knew what he'd meant, and didn't mind. She didn't want to be like Mota. At least one person on Ben knew that about her.

"So what's next for you?" he said. "You going to settle down and have a normal life now?"

Osaji felt as if the room were listening for her answer. Claustrophobia suddenly oppressed her. "Let's go outside," she said. "Maybe we can see Golconda now."

All was blackness outside, except the glowing ark itself. They swam around and sat atop it, silent with their crowded thoughts. At last Osaji said, "Do spacers always go back to space?"

"No, I think I'll give Ben another try," he said.

"Good," Osaji answered.

He turned to look at her. Through his facemask, his expression was indistinguishable. "You never answered my question."

Osaji still couldn't answer right away. Even out here, she felt the pull of community and family and duty, tugging at her to become the woman she ought to be.

Then, defying it all, she said, "I want to go over the mountains again."

"Really?" he said.

"Yes. I want to find what else is out there. I want to explore the glass city, and know what happened to its builders."

"Yeah," he said.

"Will Jack go back?"

"I think I may. I've decided you Bennites have something here, with these arks, this autopoiesis thing."

"It's not a new idea," Osaji said. It was, in fact, as old as life.

"No, but it's a better idea than you realize. Permeable membranes, that's the key: a constant exchange between outside and in. You've got to let the world leak in, and let yourself flow out into the nutrient bath around you. You've got to let in ideas, and observations, and...well, affection...or you become hard and dead inside. Life is all about having a

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permeable self — not so you're unclear who you are, but so you overlap a little with the others on the edges."

Osaji was too surprised to say anything. She could not imagine anyone less permeable than Jack. But as she thought about it, and herself, she said hesitantly, "Some people are too permeable. They spend their lives trying to flow out, and never take in nutrient for themselves. They end up thin and empty inside."

Just then, she saw a mote of light ahead. "Look!" she cried.

It was Golconda. Ahead waited joyous reunions, amazing tales, celebrations of a new future. Once they arrived with their news, the planet would never be the same.

"All the same," Jack said, "I think I'll take an outboard motor next time."

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Rand Lee's third story for us this year is very different from either of his last two. It's part of a series of stories about interactions between humans and the alien D'/fy. The last story in this series, "Coming of Age Day," appeared in our Dec. 2003 issue and we've reprinted that story on our Website this month. These stories are challenging and rewarding.

Picnic on Pentecost

By Rand B. Lee

THE PLANET HAS A FACE like a dead circus performer, slag green, gray-yellow, flecked with mica tinsel. You cannot tell it is a killer, except that it has no manners. No brothers or sisters; three suns: One, Two, Three. The weirdest orbit you can think of. Every thirteen years it earns the name Pentecost.

Four of us, then: Jacques, Cora, Willem, and I. We do everything, my dears; we are practically a four-celled organism: Jacques black, West Indian (that's Earth) background; Cora, from the Europa Syndicate, vaguely Chinese from what little you can see through the machinery she calls her face; Willem, Dutch-Irish, two fathers he had, a gene-splicee of course, reared on Angel Station; and what did I call myself then? Oh, yes. Elizabeth. I grew up in the lusty halls of the Convent of the Sisters of Eternal Charity, on Masserat. I am white as the Ace of Moons, whiter than anybody in three hundred years; gene-provenance unknown.

Cora is our Coordinator for this little jaunt, the brains that links

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us all and helps us work smoothly, as a unit. We are utterly, totally, completely in love with one another.

Just another survey team. The Damanakippith/fy, who are furry (all different colors), tall, look vaguely like centaurs, and are probably the sexiest beings in the outer rim of this galaxy, do it in sixes. They cannot imagine doing anything in less than sixes. Nobody has quite figured out why, since they have five fingers on each of their two hands and five toes on each of their two feet, as we do (well, as I used to). They like quartz crystals, which may be a clue. Because the D'/fy think Humans are cute, they gave us all their technology within four hundred years of their first contact with us.

That's why we can spacefold and stick our noses into other peoples' back yards. Faster than light drive is simple once you realize that light is an agreement, not a thing. We do it in fours, all linked together in the Momship, making the old romances real, real, real.

We emerged from Dreamtime very nearly in the middle of the planet, claxons going all up and down our spines, sensors doing impossible readouts. Pentecost lay dangerously close to us, swimming in a shroud of radiation woven by her three suns, which were also doing their best to persuade our instruments that we existed only at intervals. (This is in fact true, according to the Damanakippith/fy, but uncomforting to four Human explorers comfortable with life in four dimensions.) Jacques started sorting out the rhythm of the radiation fluxes while Willem pushed us into a more sensible position relative to Pentecost. We did not call it Pentecost till later. At first we called it That-goddamn-planet-is-trying-to-goddamn-shred-us (Jacques's name for it, which seemed to fit).

Cora readjusted our shields to compensate for the stresses on the hull, and when it was obvious that (a) we were not going to be pulled apart in a merry display of gravity flexion or (b) poisoned by the umptiple-neutron-bomb effects that the new planet seemed to be swimming in, I gave Momship the go-ahead to start relaxing us.

"What happened?" asked Cora, through a mouthful of gadgets. She was a simple, direct soul. "This is not the Vanderwettering system."

"Indeed it appears not to be, dearest Cora," said Willem. "Indeed we

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are several parsecs distant and multiple degrees west from the nearest Nightlight radial. Indeed we are in unmapped territory."

"Ugly," commented Jacques. Joined by Cora to the sensors, we peered at the planet in various wavelengths. It was not entirely ugly, even in the normform spectrum. The glitters were pretty, like diamonds in a mudpack. In the radio frequency, the planet was chaos. Jacques said, "No atmosphere to speak of. Some oxygen-bearing rock, however, and there appears to be — " the image flapped in my face — "an artificial structure on the what-we-will-call-for-convenience's-sake 'night' side." He did not have to verbalize the fact that Mom had chosen the biggest sun as the referent for our discussions of planetary "day" and "night." The artificial structure looked like a condom with legs.

(Condoms are artificial penile coverings once used to prevent fertilization of the Human female and to prevent transmission of disease to whomever. You will now find them featured prominently in the sexkits of back-to-the-landers and other primitivists.)

So the "night" side was the side of the planet currently facing away from Sun One. This is not to say that it was in any sense unlit. When we got there, the mud was still flecked with bright little micabits, but the predominant color was not green or yellow, it was a saturated electric blue. That was because although Sun One and Sun Two were sort of yellow, Sun Three — the one whose orbit kept it opposite Sun One's — shone azure. This *was* nice to look at in the visible spectrum, if you like mud that looks like fluorescent bread-mold instead of assorted bruises. Mom landed and we all got out.

Three local days later, Jacques and Willem were dead, and what was left of Cora could not even stutter in binary. And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

Thirteen. It changes, the sky; they shift, the Three; time passes. I dance for Jacques and Willem. Ululating, I eat the silver dust, which seems to suit me just fine, now. It is nice nice to go without Momsuits. Dance, I do.

I am glad there be no mirror in shuttlesides. Lingo slips; hemispheric aphasia, hemidemisemiquaverings along my spatulate nerve-runnels. Goddess-God, what it was like, seeing the fire come down and watching my dear loves change!

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Alive, I dance thirteen commonyears away.

There be others here. Indigenes, I think them then, pretty, gossamery, sweet-things. Never do they come down to Earth — or, rather, Sludge, or Pentecost, my name for our find because of the way the fire fell and what it did to us. Float, they do, far above in the winds of the blue heights. During the times I cannot speak, or think in linear terms, I watch them fly, my fairies as I have come to perceive them, floating above the hollow in the hills where the Momship shuttle landed. Their wings, like mica sheets, capture the light of the three. I have no idea what they eat. Dreams, maybe.

Thirteen years after we are captured and changed, the second shuttle ship arrives. I know it is thirteen years later because Momship, kept alive above me by the oversuperhyperabundant solar radiations, tells me so, through Cora. Have I mentioned that Cora is alive, still, too? In a manner of speaking. The shuttle, hatches fused by the firefall while we three poked around outside, sealed her in with only our nervelink for company. For years she seemed comatose; no words passed between us. (I am so different now, I cannot tell if it is I or she whose new physiognomy barriers our love.) Our link, however, stayed open, and through it Momship sent me pictures of the new scout, which has come looking for us.

Looking! For! Us! I twinkle in all my shiny new members.

Thirteen. The planet has gone through the blue night, and the yellow-green-brown-bruisy morning, and the golden afternoon, and green sunset hits as blue slides over the horizon again. During those years of isolation, I observed myself doing odd things. My new body scampered and capered and ate the mica, and what I excreted was soft and moldable in the glare of One and Two. I myself felt no heat; mirrored, I reflected much of it away, and I suspect my nerve endings were so changed I cannot feel infrared anyway. The shuttle grew pink at high noon, eight years after the Change, and Cora, trapped inside but not safe from either the firefall or the suns' radiations, heaved in my heart like a fetus trying to abort itself. I dreamed of ways to kill her swiftly, but she was armored against everything but pain. And I observed myself making things from my excretions, and I did not understand what, oh Goddess-God, what I was molding of the mica with my not-hands. The condom seemed to be directing me.

Perhaps, I think, as night falls at last after thirteen commonyears, *the*

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new ship will know. I watch it, a blare in the ultraviolet (which I now perceive without Momship's help) to join its dot with the dot of our Cora-laden orbiting scout. I hear, with the help of Mom through CoradearestCora whom I have longed to kill, communications spatter. Hailings; shiptoship relays; approaches, latchings-on; boardings. My guts (do I have guts? I must) flutter, as though the new ship were sorting through my intestines instead of Mom's memory banks. Silence.

Silence.

Silence..

Help help help, I scream, and laugh inside myself; it is so silly. Help whom? Help what? *Help help*, I scream. *Save us!* I have nothing better to do with this silence. In the blue-green dusk I peer and listen. *Don't go away*, I beg the new ship, my mouth full of silver sand. *Please come down, look for us, look for wreckage, look! Don't! Go!*

So they go. Detach, winky-blink, into transit and gone. Mom continues orbiting, unperturbed, and I get the first clear thought from Cora in thirteen years: *What*?

Surprised, sleepy, just waking up, as it were, from a juicy nap between Jacques and me. No pain, apparently, not anymore. *Cora!* I babble. *Cora Cora my Goddess-God oh my dear oh are you all right* — how *could* she be "all right"? — *oh God I've been so lonesome!*

Cora: *Elizabeth*? I howl up at the Three. *Elizabeth, what's happened? I only feel you on the link, and you're out of phase. Where are Jacques and Willem!*

And the blue fire falls.

I EAT, I EXCRETE, with my changed hands I shape the silver slime I excrete, and I watch all this as I have watched it for thirteen years without understanding or, now, caring. The artificial structure we first sighted has grown under my care. My work has changed it from a condom with legs to a network of channels, running out into the mica-strewn waste, silver channels etched complexly, running out not straightly, but curved and angled in a manner that my mind, admittedly not at its sharpest, cannot fully comprehend. Cora has stopped trying to talk to me and is talking to Mom instead. She by now realizes that it is not the same blue night she

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recalls from our landing. Whatever her body now looks like within the firefall-sealed shuttle, her brain must be intact, and I am glad for this. That means she is still herself, or so I comfort myself by thinking.

Happening now, it is. Firefall it is. Thirteen cycles it is. Blue night it is. Rushing rushing down over along the silver channels, energy from the firefall beams up through the condom into space. *What*? I think. *A beacon*? *Is that what it has made me make*? I scream, the fire catches me, tongues like before, why did I not think to burrow hide erect a shelter? Flesh melting, I scream, Cora asking, *What*? *What*?, and I am fire, all fire, and I change oh Goddess-God I change, growing up and high and legs off arms off feet wriggling away smoke burning blue genitals gone, running into mica slag like Jacques's face and along my spine a scream of youth.

Wings, I sprout wings. Pushing, tearing out of me, liberated by the flame, the condom at the center of the wheel I have built singing the wings out of me. I can hear it singing now, and my cells responding. It is taking up the blue light into itself and it is singing and my flesh answers yes and my wings answer yes and my bones thin and my chest expands and my heart, huge, swells and my eyes open so wide and up I am riding on the blue winds, up. *Elizabeth! Don't leave me!* Cora is weeping, but that is not music. And I soar.

Up, up, catching the wind, buoyed by the firefall, up. Lighter, lightest. The dark mountains are beating their drums, the desert is rattling its cymbals. From the farthest peaks, where we four never went, the fairies sing in answer, not in words. I am conscious that somewhere in my unutterably altered anatomy I am still neurolinked through Cora to Momship and she is recording all I think and feel. Then I forget this, because the music is too beautiful.

Up, soaring, higher. Peaks all around. Fairies — no *word* for them; a *song* for them, rather — fairies, the Fair Folk, wafting 'round me. I fly more clumsily than they; I seem an atrocity in my bulk compared to them; they help support me. Their song caresses me, and I realize that their song is absolutely and precisely a mirror of the runnels I have built in the sand around the condom with my own mica excretions. *Come! Here!* the beacon calls to the sky. *Come! Here! Life! Come!* And so do my fairies.

We join, they and I. Ah Goddess-God, ah Jacques, ah Willem, ah dearest Cora, ah long sobbing loneliness, ah silkflesh to notflesh. We join,

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and the joining is like the wheel I have made, too, and in the joining the fairies rip me open, rip me top to bottom and I help them rip me and I say take and see and taste and consume. And we feast upon one another without fear, until the firefall ends.

Elizabeth! Don't leave me!

Pentecost swings into yellowish daylight. Cora is in my head still, a long wail, then nothing, cut off sharp as butter under the knife. I am great. I hang in a cave. I make things come out of me which my sisterbrothers feed upon. They say, *What is Earth*? They say, *What is Momship*? They say, *What songs are these, the manform and the womanform*? They do not say any of this, of course, not in words, but how else can I transcribe for you their songs? That which comes out of me has given to the fairies thoughts, memories, and feelings my brain has collected, and now, hanging in the cave like a gigantic mutant opossum, I have never felt my mind to be so clear.

They drink from me my memory of the ship, how we came. They drink from me Jacques and Willem. For the first time, feeling them drink, I experience no sorrow, and no sorrow over Cora, who lies comatose on the other side of the world, the mind-reviving energies of the firefall beyond her mind's help for another thirteen-commonyear day. Momship can keep her alive, but not conscious without the firefall's extra energy boost. I now know what has killed us, and what that killing means. I let my brothersisters feed until the torpor comes upon me, and I sleep.

When I awaken, I feel Cora again. The blue light sings in the cave mouth. My sisterbrothers are gone; I am alone again. Cora: *Willem*? *Elizabeth*? *Jacques*? *Report, please*. I am immobile. I seem to have become part of the cave wall. I cannot feel differentiated limbs; I rather sense that my human brain and limbic system are still in there, somewhere, preserved by the artistry of the alien construct to which my flesh has been joined. Cora: *Elizabeth*? *I am receiving a faint signal. Please attempt to boost*. Outside the cave, the azure fire explodes and dances and pinwheels and pulses on the slag plains.

I call: *Cora*? *This is Elizabeth. Do you read me*?

I read you, Elizabeth. Report your condition. My data is incomplete. Have you any contact with the others?

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I cannot tell her they are dead. *Negative, Cora,* I reply. *They seem to be out of range. Repeat, out of range. Unable to locate. What is your condition?*

The shuttle appears to have sustained damage, Cora replies. She sounds puzzled rather than alarmed. *I seem to be locked in. I have no clear sense of my own body, and my memory appears fragmentary. Where are you, Elizabeth?*

In a cave, I reply. *I estimate twenty kilometers to the northwest of your position.*

How in hell did you get way over there?

I'm not sure, I say.

What is the condition of your life support? Mom is giving me no clear data.

I can see my suit lying where I had sloughed it off onto the mica slag outside the cave. I say, *Life-support appears intact. I don't think I can move, however.* I do not tell her that my body has changed from that of a mutant opossum to something resembling a beehive with bat ears.

Elizabeth, says Cora. *Mom reports severe radiation fluxes. The plane appears to be some kind of amplifier or transducer. Mom has located extensive artificial construction in the immediate vicinity of the downed shuttlecraft, and said construction is emitting a powerful signal along a wide frequency band. Unable as yet to interpret, but it might attract attention to us eventually.*

I shriek, I gnash my nonexistent teeth, I strain peculiar muscles, I try to rip myself out of the cave wall. *It mustn't!* I scream. *It's a trap! Cora, it's a trap! Trigger Mom for a wideburst sweep and destroy it! Cora?*

And silence again. And dawn again. And sleep again.

MOTHERFATHERPARENT, say the little ones in my womb, *tell us a story.* They do not say this in words. They secrete it. I open my mental eyes and realize that I have become the mountain. It is blue dusk outside; the fire has not yet fallen, but it will fall, soon. The infants lining my innards, drinking of my flesh, are bright sparks in the lower left center of my consciousness. I feel like an apartment building. Where my head would be, had I a head, the wind howls around my peaks. Where my

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hands would be, the mica slag plain cracks into sparkling gulleys, which run twenty kilometers to our original landing site. My spine seems to have flattened, curved, and split, so that I receive a constant flow of untranslatable impressions up the core of me from near and far away. It is as though I have become a kind of Momship myself.

To my children I saysingsecrete: *The blue night is come, and the fire will soon fall. Prepare dear ones for birth, and do not fear the winds.* And they suckle, gathering their strength.

Already I can sense the radiation surge. I cast out for Cora. I feel huge, powerful. Nothing. I cast out for Momship. Nothing. Has her orbit deteriorated? Is she on the other side of the planet again? I cast as far as I can, and a distant echo of a response flicks a remote tongue. *Cora?*

In the radio frequencies, the storm begins, and the fire begins to fall.

On the plain, the alien transmitter which I have built in my earlier incarnation explodes into action, thrusting its beacon skyward. Pain sears me. I divide, split. Blue axes hack at my mountainflesh. Oh Goddess-God, there is no pain like the pain of giving birth; it is a ripe pain, a release pain, but do not imagine there is nothing of loss in it. My babies cry and cry and leap and push and out! Out! Out! Dropping like fruit from my flesh, burning bursting blue in the firefall, screaming as their cells proliferate, evincing new patterns, writhing themselves into shapes I only dimly recognize. Fairies? Not fairies. Something new. Once they were my brothersisters, and we joined for the sake of Art; and now something new is coming into being from the flesh we have shared. What?

They writhe, all twenty-eight of them. Limbs burst from central balls of shuddering flesh. Blue flame licks digits into differentiation. Fingers, toes, pseudopenises, scrotal-like sacks, pseudolabia, monster clitorises. With a shudder, heads, and oh my oh my such beauty babes, dear Jacques and Willem and Cora and Elizabeth

No!

As the fire falls, the four of us come into standing position in the cavern light, all four of us, seven times multiplied. New Jacques, New Willem, New Cora, and New Elizabeth stand up in my cavernous womb and turn their perfect faces to the sky. For an instant, we are linked once more, my dearest dears and I, jewels in one setting, calm to our marrow, love flowing unimpeded through our shared veins, and in my memory we

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are tumbling again in sweet joy, and we will never be alone again. Then we begin to die a second time. Radiation rakes us. Our human cells, unprotected, cannot withstand it. Willem's brain bursts from its pan and runs down into bright blue flowers on the floor of me. He claws, trying to find his eyes, as he did on the mica slag plain that day, when I watched him in his beauty erupt into putrescence. Jacques simply shrivels, withers, combusts, popping into showers of sparks while his wail rises and rises and falls. Cora's guts kick out of her as though they have taken on lives of their own, flailing furiously in the mush of her pelvis. I think, *This is what would have happened to her if she hadn't been up in Mom*, but only part of me is thinking it; the rest of me is trying to pull the mountain that is myself down around us. For now I see me.

Seven Elizabeths caper in the blue light. Seven Elizabeths slough off their skins. Seven Elizabeths turn bright as mica, spatulate-handed, huge-eyed, their hair weaving itself into carapaces around them, jaws melting into feeding-tubes for the sucking up of slag. The Willems and Jacqueses and Coras expire on the floor, but the Elizabeths keep dancing, singing, capering in the blue flame as it falls from the sky. And I cry, *Why? Why was I spared? Why could I adapt when the others could not?*

And the Elizabeths hear me. They pause. Shimmering, attenuated, they form a circle, fingers intertwined, and they speak to me. *Thank you, genepartner*, they say. *Thank you for this great work, this song of songs! For seventy-seven cycles, since last the winged ones came to us, we have waited for the suns to bring us new beings with new songs to share.*

The fairies? I think.

Our last visitors. We rejoiced to join with them, for the sake of Art, but it has been so long. Now you have made of the remains of their ship a beacon to call others to us, and it will not be so long this time.

I made it? I cry. *I?*

We, reply the Elizabeths, and the thought-burst I receive shows me Cora, linked with Momship and the techdata stored in Mom's memory banks. It is why Cora has been kept alive, and why she is alive no longer, having served her purpose. It is good to have a purpose. Now that they have reshaped my body to build the beacon, and joined with my flesh to learn their new song, will they discard me, too?

The question is meaningless to them. I am, it seems, part of them

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forever, now, for that is the essence of their Art: the total sharing of spirit, soul, and flesh without loss of individual identity. *It is a great expansion,* the Elizabeths sing. *We have greatly learned through our collaboration. It has been a delight to create with you, genepartner.*

The Elizabeths dance on while the beacon roars into the sky. I search for Cora, but she is not there anymore. I search for Willem and Jacques, but they are not there, either. I send my wail out over the hills, and my longing out into the plains, but my beloveds are gone, ground to dust like used charcoal sticks. And as the firefall slows, and Pentecost turns again into the bruise-colored dawn, I wonder to what new song I will awaken, and what new death of love. ₹

COMING ATTRACTIONS

AS WE GO to press with this issue, the contents for our anniversary issue are almost finalized.

We plan to bring you a new story by Stephen King, "*The New York Times* at Special Bargain Rates." This short story finds the master in fine form, with a vintage tale of the uncanny.

Michael Swanwick also checks in with a first-rate short story. In "The Scarecrow's Boy," he introduces us to a robot with a bit of a problem on his hands.

Then there's "Private Eye" by Terry Bisson, in which we get a sexy spin on life in the Electronic Age, and "Sleepless Years" by Steven Utley, which gives us an interesting scientific experiment. M. Rickert and Eugene Mirabelli are also likely to be on hand next month with short stories.

Geoff Ryman contributes "Days of Wonder," an imaginative tale of the far future, and Charles Coleman Finlay takes us into the past with his historical fantasy, "The Minuteman's Witch." Robert Reed's "The Visionaries" gives us some insight into the creative process. And (need we say it?) lots more await you in our double issue next month.

Looking ahead, the December issue will start off our sixtieth year and we plan to celebrate throughout the year. Go to *www.fandsf.com* and subscribe now because you won't want to miss one issue this year.

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The figure of the sin eater is fairly common in myth and lore. But how about a guilt eater? But wait! There's more!

"Shed that Guilt! Double Your Productivity Overnight!"

By Michael Swanwick & Eileen Gunn

DEAR SIRS:

Ordinarily, I would not respond to an email such as yours. I am by nature a skeptic and, as a former advertising writer, consider myself well able to resist the transparent come-on of a carelessly written appeal to my baser nature. Today, however...

Today I found myself wracked with guilt at how much time I spend goofing around. Sunday is the end of my work-week and, as usual, all the chickens came home to roost: I absolutely had to get a story finished and sent off. And I did. I didn't do much of anything else: just worry and plot and write, all day long. I didn't even call in a pizza. Fortunately, I keep on hand an adequate supply of snickerdoodles, a nutritionally perfect source of carbs, fats, and cinnamon that will keep anxiety at bay for up to twenty-four hours.

But now, sitting here at midnight amid crumpled manuscript pages and snickerdoodle crumbs, I feel there must be a better way.

And your email, which promises I could be lounging about on Sundays, taking the day off, doing the crossword puzzle, and idly staring at things without thinking of them, certainly caught my eye.

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Can you really reduce my guilt to nothing, as your email claims? Is your service worth its unnamed but undoubtedly exorbitant cost?
Warily,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

Every word in our ad is true! For very reasonable rates, our organization will take on your guilt for a **day**, a **weekend**, or even a **month-long vacation**! You may be especially interested in our Sunday subscription, a perennial bestseller among writers.

Here's how it works: Go to our Rates page, and click on the service that best suits your needs and pocketbook. Prepay, using credit card, debit card, or PayPal. It's as simple as that!

Let's say you choose **Guilt-Free Friday Nights.** (This option is particularly popular among church-goers! Garrison Keillor says, "It's like being a Republican for an evening!") Every Friday at precisely 5:30 p.m. local time, all your **failures**, **inadequacies**, and **moral weaknesses** become our responsibility. Do anything you like! Go out dancing and drinking. Stiff the waitress. Bring home an inappropriate sex partner. Stiff the waitress, bring her home, and have inappropriate sex with her. It's all okay! You can even, if you like, **Not Write!!!** All the guilt you would normally feel is, through our proprietary process, painlessly transferred to a member of our **degraded, subhuman staff.**

For the first time since you don't know when, you'll go to sleep — as I have for many years — with a smirk on your face. So don't delay. Act now! You'll be glad you did.
Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

Dear Mr. Swanwick:

But if I didn't feel guilty, how would I write?

I have it set up that I feel guilty every day until about midnight, when it becomes the next day's problem.

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I'd change that, but I'm afraid that if I didn't wake up feeling guilty every day, I'd forget to feel guilty on Mondays.
Worriedly,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia offers a program for that! Sundays you can be guilt free, but the other six days of the week, we can hone and sharpen your guilt until it is a **keen-edged weapon of productivity!**

Just **imagine**: You're sitting at your desk and you should be writing. Instead, you log onto the Internet. Ordinarily, you'd waste countless hours on ego-searches, Sudoku, and Paris Hilton trivia. But — what's this? It's an email from the **child you never knew you'd had,** but which it turns out you abandoned in its infancy, telling you how badly her life turned out because of your neglect. You log off and reach for the phone to tell your best friend about this frightful development and — not incidentally — waste half the morning in idle chitchat and gossip. But before your hand reaches the receiver, the phone rings! It's the **Humane Society**, telling you that your childhood pet, **Fluffy**, lost all these years, has died of a painful disease you could have cured with an inexpensive treatment, had it not been for the fact that you neglected to put your name and address on its collar.

Stunned, you put down the phone. You stare out the window — your last, best chance to avoid actual work. And then (this is our *pièce de resistance!)* one of our trained professionals calls you up and in **your mother's voice** says, "I saw what you did last night, and I'm very disappointed."

You start to work. You don't raise your head from the paper until twelve hours have passed and the first fifty pages of your blockbuster fantasy dekalogy have been completed. At this rate, the first volume will be finished in a **month!**

All for a perfectly understandable fee.
Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

This sounds like my ordinary workday. I do not see how your service could add to my productivity.

The lost kids, the dead pet...this is my life in a nutshell. And my mother's disapproval? I obsess about it, of course, like everyone else, but it does not drive me to work on the fantasy dekalogy one single minute.

How did you know about the dekalogy? It has such a lovely synopsis: elves, mirrors, electric trains, trees that extend into the stratosphere and rain gold on those below, and Dick Cheney's evil twin. *NYT* bestseller? Fowler and Lethem can eat their hearts out. But I do not work on it.

Does your service offer anything else?

Curiously,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

We are in receipt of your heartbreaking missive, in which you ask, "*Does your service offer anything else*?"

The answer to which is, of course, **You Bet Your Sweet Patootie!** Hold onto your hat, because **Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia** is prepared to **DOUBLE YOUR PRODUCTIVITY OVERNIGHT!!!**

Sound incredible? It is! But true. And there's more! We are prepared to do this at absolutely no cost to you!

Here's how it works: You provide the idea and parameters for that story you want to write but for whatever reason can't. Our downtrodden and overworked staff will labor into the wee hours of the night to produce ten pages of crisply polished prose, all of which is guaranteed to be of **final draft quality!** You will then, driven by a combination of **guilt**, **admiration**, and **ambition**, produce an equal number of pages of (it goes without saying) superior literary value. And so it will go, turn on turn, until in less time than you ever imagined possible the story is complete.

And what do we demand in exchange for this **incredible service**? Only the pleasure of being of service, and three-quarters of the take when the story is sold! Yes...we *are* taking more than our fair share. But consider this: It is more than our fair share of a book which otherwise **would not exist**. Everybody wins!

So don't delay — **ACT TODAY!**

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Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

Dear Mr. Swanwick

I can tell you've worked hard devising this service, and that you believe in it. But could I see some hard evidence of its efficacy? Testimonials, maybe?

Skeptically,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

You certainly are a **tough nut to crack**. Not that we think you are a nut. Absolutely not! Yet crack you we shall.

You asked for testimonials? Testimonials you shall have!

A **Former Schoolteacher** in Maine says:

I was trapped in a dead-end job, living in a trailer, and writing at night. My total production was something like five words a week — and I wasn't working on haikus but novels! Then GEoP taught me to **produce, produce, produce!** Now it's a sorry month that doesn't see a new novel from me. I write so much that I have to use pseudonyms to keep from flooding the market. So now I am a happy man. The pay is pretty damn good too, but so what? All I ever wanted was to be a **human fountain of words**, and, as the old joke goes, Now I Are One!

— S. K.

A **British YA Author** gushes:

As a single mother, I spent seven years working on a short story about a woman sitting in a cheap café trying to write. It was depressing and going nowhere. Heck, **I** was depressing and going nowhere. Then GEoP showed me how to open the **sluice-gates of my soul!** Now I'm a billionaire, world-famous, and married to the kind of man my ex-husband only wishes he could be. Thanks, GEoP!

— J. K. R.

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A **Noted Dead British Fantasist** writes:

When I was alive, I was the slowest writer imaginable. It took me an entire lifetime — and it was not a short one! — to pen a single children's book, a trilogy, and a handful of short works and fragments. After my demise, I decided that **enough was enough,** and linked my fortunes to GEoP's star. Now I've written so many books I can't keep track of them! If only I'd discovered GEoP earlier, I could have wrapped up my career and retired to Miami at age thirty!

— J. R. R. T.

And there are **many, many more** such unsolicited testimonials on file! Shouldn't yours be among them?

Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

Dear Mr. Swanwick:

It all sounds very good, but I just don't understand how you can do it. How on earth can your staff turn out such remarkable volumes of work, when it's all I can do to finish a single page? Can you possibly clear up my confusion?

Uncertainly,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

Clear up your confusion we shall! As you know by now, we here at **Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia** are strong believers in the motivational power of guilt. Not just your standard guilt, mind you, but **crushing, soul-destroying guilt**. The kind of guilt that through our secret proprietary process we remove from **thousands of clients** every day.

What do we do with this guilt once we've piped it into our holding vats? Do we release it into the environment? Certainly not! Rather, we inject it directly into the bloodstreams of our **suffering staff writers**. Who, feeling responsible for every vile and petty thing that happens in the world, lose themselves in **compulsive and desperate scribbling.**

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It is their misery that has raised many a despairing ink-stained wretch out of the **Slough of Writerly Despond** and into the **Glorious Light of Fiscal Solvency.** Let us do the same for you!

Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

Dear Mr. Swanwick:

I am beginning to have my doubts about the entire enterprise. Am I supposed to benefit from the misery of others? I was not brought up to be like that.

Perhaps we should simply drop the matter.

Firmly,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

I must confess that everybody here at **Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia,** from myself down to the most wretched staff writer, finds your reluctance to sign up with the firm that turned a humorless and unproductive nobody into **Terry Pratchett** absolutely baffling. Let me speak to you like a Dutch uncle. You must seize control of your own destiny!

Ask yourself this: What is it that you really want? Fame? Money? Literary immortality? To be a *New York Times* bestseller? Invitations to **gala Hollywood parties?** The love of millions of readers? To write so many books that by carefully stacking one of each, you can build the walls of a **new addition** to your house? All these things are attainable! Simply tell us your goals and **Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia** will make them real for you.

But we can't do it alone. We need your active cooperation.

What will it take to get you to **sign up today?** Our operators are standing by!

Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

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Dear Mr. Swanwick:

I don't believe your organization can help me after all. Seeing your list of goals made me realize that I don't want any of them. Not the fame, not the money, and certainly not the gala Hollywood parties. All I really want is to be able to write. It may not make sense to you, but if only I could write prolifically and be left alone, that would be enough for me. I wouldn't even have to be happy.

But I don't suppose that you, or anyone else for that matter, can provide a service that will do that.

Realistically,
Eileen Gunn

Dear Ms. Gunn:

You underestimate us here at **Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia!** We are expertly qualified to analyze your situation and devise a satisfactory means of resolving all your emotional and psychological problems in a manner that will satisfy you. Now that we completely understand your situation, it is the simplest of matters to devise a custom situation, based on a close reading of your letters and our long association with **littérateurs of all stripes**, which has given us enormous insight into the **writerly mentality**,

Thus it is that we are happy to offer you a low-paying position as a member of our **miserable and downtrodden writing staff.**

Sincerely,
Michael Swanwick
Chief Creative Officer
Guilt Eaters of Philadelphia

Dear Mr. Swanwick:

Do your employee benefits include snickerdoodles?

Hopefully,
Eileen Gunn

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Yes, it's true — a group of fans did indeed sign us up for the Reed of the Month Club. The service has some glitches to work out (in fact, Robert Reed's story next month reveals some of their secrets — wait for it), but it's generally very good. This month they've provided us with a tale of the future that we found hard to predict.

Salad for Two

By Robert Reed

SHE COULDN'T SAY WHEN the man became real to her. When did he stop being just a faceless customer, rising to the status of Regular? Was it the time he bought eggs and salad greens and a big sack of walnuts along with a tall bottle of extra-virgin olive oil? Years later, Gillian recalled scanning those particular items, or at least she thought she could — memory remains such a fickle business — and while sacking his purchases, she happened to ask about his dinner plans. It was an idle question. She meant nothing by it. But his response was a memorable smile and something said about a salad for two.

The man seemed handsome enough, tall and fit looking, with his dark brown hair kept short and tidy. On the rare occasions when Gillian thought of the customer, she pictured him with that bright smile and mischievous brown eyes. He was always pleasant and probably quite sweet. And no doubt he was a charmer. Something about the way he said, "Salad for two," told her that he was flirting, and yet it didn't bother her. Her question was just idle noise, and his response had to be the same.

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Besides, boys and men were always hitting on Gillian — a state of affairs that began even before she knew the significance of their happy chatter. She was tall and pretty in an unconventional way — a lean, elegant creature with just enough shyness in her makeup that she would dip her head in public moments, smiling out of simple nervousness. More than anything, it was the shyness that made strange men believe she must be sophisticated or smart, or stuck-up, or maybe out-and-out spoiled. But despite a lifetime of interest from the males in her little world, Gillian seemed to lack the easy confidence enjoyed by girls with only a fraction of her natural gifts.

Later, when it seemed important, she decided that the man became real to her when she bothered to learn his name.

Jason.

"How's your day been, Jason?" she might inquire, stuffing greens and stalks of broccoli into a brown paper sack. "Another salad tonight?"

"It's been a good day, and maybe so. Haven't decided."

Like many of the Regulars, Jason had an account with the grocery store, signing an invoice for each purchase.

"Have a nice evening," she might tell him, nothing about her words or tone different from what she used with any other customer, Regular or not. At least, she didn't think there was a difference. "Bye-bye," she would sing to him.

"Night, Gillian," Jason would reply, winking brightly while showing that big, joyful smile.

And then she wouldn't think about the man again. At least not until the next day, if she happened to be at work. And if she were elsewhere, then she probably wouldn't consider him at all.

His last name was Popper, and Gillian couldn't decide when she learned that critical detail. But later she would recall an afternoon when the store was especially busy and Gillian had to call out for help. That's when she realized Jason felt some kind of loyalty to her, or maybe even an ill-defined interest. Because when the adjacent lane opened up, he waved other customers over there just so he could stand in her line, waiting patiently with a gallon of skim milk in one hand and an over-stuffed basket in the other.

Jason Popper became very real after that.

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His attentions didn't go unnoticed. The assistant manager — a mousy-haired woman in the midst of her second divorce — made the point of teasing Gillian about her boyfriend.

"He's not my boyfriend," the cashier argued.

"Oh, I know he's not," the older woman said with a smile. But then her eyes narrowed and an edge crept into her voice. "Of course you know your boyfriend's loaded, don't you?"

Gillian's boyfriend was a college freshman who had a pesky habit of making her pay for their dates.

"Popper inherited a ton of money," the assistant manager explained. "From what I hear, he owns a couple hundred shares of Berkshire Hathaway."

"Is that a lot?" asked Gillian. Which was a reasonable question, since she happened to own sixty shares of automobile stock — a gift from her grandmother; and because of the ongoing bankruptcy, worth little more than two tickets at the cheap movie theatre.

"Just one share of Berkshire Hathaway is a fortune," Gillian learned. "If he wanted, Jason could buy out this store every day for the rest of his life."

But weren't quite a few of their customers wealthy?

"But how many are interested in you?"

At that instant, Jason became embarrassingly real. Thinking of him standing in her lane, all those groceries clasped in his hands...well, Gillian felt herself beginning to blush.

"I wish he'd give me a second look," the assistant manager complained. Then with a bawdy wink, she added, "I'll tell you what. I'd do a hell of a lot more than just 'wish' him a good evening."

Maybe there was truth in the accusation. Gillian tried to count the times that Jason didn't use her lane, and after several months, the number was zero. And if she happened to be on break, he would turn and stroll the aisles for a while longer, waiting until she returned. And always, without exception, he found something nice to say. He never actually told Gillian that she was attractive, but when he spoke about the lovely evening, he would stare at her cheekbones and her short curly hair and those big shy eyes that couldn't help but blink and smile at the same time. He was sweet and charming, but not pushy. Never pushy. That was one reason why she

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felt so comfortable with the gentleman. And of course the difference in their ages insulated her: Jason Popper was probably in his late forties, or even past fifty, while the object of his polite affections was waiting to turn seventeen.

For a year and a half, Jason was a very regular Regular. In smooth, almost imperceptible steps, their relationship evolved to where Gillian began looking forward to their several-times-a-week meetings. With a phrase here and an anecdote there, little details about each other were revealed. Sometimes her real boyfriend visited the store, and at least once, Jason chatted amiably with the boy. But on a different day, he asked Gillian about the two of them — one harmless question leading to several more — and after she had finished answering, he nodded and smiled while pointing out, "You can do better."

Yet when she finally broke up with the boy, Jason did absolutely nothing to fill the gap in her social life.

Now and again, her friend mentioned a busy life. He was some kind of researcher working for far-flung interests. He sometimes vanished for a week or two, and on his return, she would mention his tan, and he would name a conference in some exotic tropical port-of-call. And there were occasions — usually when she was out on a date with some new boy — when she noticed Jason at a distance. Each time, a different woman was at his side. A few of his dates were barely older than Gillian, but most were closer to his age. If she felt jealous, she was careful not to admit it to herself. Yet each of Jason's dates was beautiful, and sometimes, when Gillian needed encouragement, she imagined herself belonging at the bottom of that select group.

One day, early in their relationship, Jason asked about her college plans. Gillian mentioned several possibilities before confessing that she wasn't sure about anything. Then his smile grew serious, and with his most fatherly tone, he mentioned that her future was being built by an army of engineers and programmers, all working in the growing field of artificial intelligence.

Gillian didn't have a technical mind and his advice meant nothing.

But after that, she took the trouble to Google and Wiki him. In short order, she learned that the man was astonishingly rich. But more than that, the name "Jason Popper" was famous in an odd little corner of

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mathematics. She had never realized that she knew a rare kind of genius, and his potent little algorithms were fueling research in half a dozen fields, including AIs and cybernetics.

In the end, they were good enough friends that Gillian felt obligated to warn him that she was quitting soon. After countless delays, she finally decided on a college, and it wasn't going to be a local school. She'd work another two weeks at the store, and then she would move a thousand miles to live with her maiden aunt, finding work there to help pay her way while attending a little university in the wild woods of Minnesota.

"Good for you," Jason declared.

That was the first time she felt hurt by him. She was hoping to see disappointment in his face, and perhaps hear a little pain in his voice. Wasn't she walking out of his life? Yet after more than a year of using her checkout lane, proving his unflagging loyalty, all he could do was offer a grand smile while saying, "The best of luck to you!"

During her last week at the grocery, Gillian didn't see the man once.

Was he traveling? But he hadn't mentioned going anywhere, and lately he had made a point of telling her if he was. She even took time to study the store records, discovering that her friend had shopped here only yesterday, half an hour before she arrived, signing for greens and oil and walnuts and a plastic box of cherry tomatoes — the makings for a salad big enough for two.

On her last day, Gillian worked until closing time.

It was night when she walked out to the old Corolla that her father bought her last year. Sitting in another corner of the parking lot was a sports car. She didn't notice it until it came to life, headlights opening as it crept closer to her. The car was a hybrid running on its muscular batteries, and it silently pulled up alongside her. The driver's window dropped and a familiar voice said, "Gillian," with a suddenness that startled her.

She turned.

Jason was smiling, but something about the expression was different. Wrong. He looked serious and grave and suspicious, but just when she felt a touch of worry, the smile was replaced with a serious shake of the head and the handing over of an envelope, pink and square and bulging from whatever was stuffed inside.

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"Good luck to you," the man told her.

"Thank you," she squeaked weakly.

Then he drove away, leaving her alone in the parking lot. Troubled and not certain why, she climbed into her own car and locked the doors and turned on the old-fashioned engine. For a few moments, she stared at the envelope, wondering if the right thing to do was to leave it at the desk, refusing whatever this was because something about the moment and these circumstances felt wrong.

But she had to look. How could she resist? With a long nail, she tore open the envelope, pulling out a greeting card that showed a calico kitten hiding behind a daisy, no words on the outside and nothing inside but a man's careful scribblings, plus a tidy stack of one hundred dollar bills.

She counted fifteen bills before stopping.

This was exceptionally wrong, she thought. But she couldn't decide what made it wrong. She had done nothing and expected nothing from a man who had plenty of money to spend however he wished.

After a few moments of reflection, she finally read what Jason Popper had written:

"Gillian —

"You're a lovely girl, and have a wonderful youth. I'll come for you after the machines take over.

"Jason."

Beneath his signature was the name of a corporation that only recently went public, and beside it her suitor had jotted down the words, "If you want, use my gift to buy a few shares. They'll make you happy."

And as it happened, they did.

THE NEW WORLD was smart and flashy-bright and prone to rapid, imaginative transformations — just as Gillian guessed it would be. The poorest human was richer than any emperor of old, and civilization was suddenly wielding an array of fabulous, muscular tools, giving it power over all but the farthest reaches of the solar system. But the Thinkers weren't quite what she'd guessed they would be. In her speculative moments, first at the college in Minnesota and then at graduate school in Boston, she envisioned computers that were a little larger than the

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machines she worked with, and fancier, and much colder. She knew practically nothing about the engineering of computers or AIs — a limitation she admitted to friends and lovers. But quite a few people knew she was a stockholder in Popper's thriving company, and if she wasn't competent in the tech stuff, then where did she get the good sense to invest at the beginning?

How she told that particular story depended on her audience.

Girlfriends heard a frank, somewhat amusing tale about a flirtatious old man and Gillian's extraordinary good luck. But boyfriends needed to be handled delicately, and experience taught her to pick between two basic avenues: Jason was a kind, harmless gentleman — basically just a fatherly figure. Or if she wanted to lift her value in the young male's eyes, she would play up the aspects of desire. She would imply that the great man had been interested in her, and perhaps she had encouraged him. On one or two occasions, when she thought she was in love and feared that her young man's attentions were wavering, Gillian would tell certain stories that were not even a little bit true.

It was amazing to see how a lover's mind could be intrigued by the idea of sharing a cramped bed with a billionaire's ex-girlfriend.

Gillian didn't particularly like that game, and when she was older, she consciously decided to tell nothing but the truth.

Yet what was the truth?

A decade had passed and she couldn't feel absolutely certain about the details involving her cashiering job or the customers. And another ten years brought her to an unnerving point where the past was vague and cluttered, but what she remembered with absolute clarity was the precise, much-practiced way she always told her story.

By then, the new world had begun.

Twenty years after the kitten and daisy and money, the Thinkers finally took over civilization — if only along proscribed, carefully regulated lines.

Jason Popper didn't build any of the hyperintelligent machines. But where a dozen other companies took that job, he owned the miraculous algorithms that were working furiously at the core of each newborn machine. And the machines were tinier than any contraption a young cashier would have imagined. One dime would have dwarfed the typical

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Thinker, and during that first pivotal year, the world's population of AIs could have fit comfortably on any shelf in a tiny neighborhood grocery store.

The results were sudden and world shaking, and for less prepared minds, they were terrifying.

But Gillian found the revolution bracing and quite fun.

The stock she had purchased two decades ago had already split repeatedly, and that following year, when its value was soaring, she sold half of her wealth in order to diversify in ten new industries, using the rest of her cash to buy a Thinker of her own.

Implantations were not routine yet. But the complications proved minor, the training period frustrating but endurable, and before her forty-first birthday, Gillian found herself in possession of an intelligence that was entirely her own — and she had the medical bills to prove it.

Soon the ancient limits to growth and social change had vanished.

Those first-generation Thinkers dreamed up new power sources and efficient rockets, plus the means not only to fix the Earth's teetering environment, but the tools to reconfigure the worlds and moons of a solar system that was suddenly lying within easy reach.

Before she was fifty, Gillian had her physical self made young again.

Soon after that, she emigrated to Mars, and later, out of love, jumped to a pioneer city floating in the clouds of Titan.

Now and again, she would mention that she knew Jason Popper back in those "before" days. But since everyone had an augmented mind, she had to be careful. Memories were huge, and vast data pools were available even to the average citizen. Her audiences were informed. She learned the hard way not to vary the details of her story, even when it was a new decade and a different world. People still talked to people. That would never change. Inevitably her new friends would ask to see the note that the famous man had written inside the kitten-and-daisy card, and Gillian would have to shake her head, admitting that she hadn't kept it. That pivotal treasure had been lost somewhere between college and graduate school. Then she noticed that people she didn't know were familiar with her non-adventure, and whenever a new face asked to see the treasured gift card, she could be sure that the keen mind behind the face already knew that it was gone.

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There was more gossip than ever in the universe, and like gossip in any age, it was both subtle and cruel.

Gillian was lying, some assumed. Not about the cashier job or having some thin connection with the famous Popper. But they felt that the note was a bit of fantasy on her part, or more than a bit. And the money was surely a fiction too. Maybe Popper had suggested that she buy some of his stock, or maybe she had done it on her own. But a lot of people had bankrolled Popper's speculative business; the solar system had enough success stories, it was said, to populate a large asteroid.

Several centuries had passed, nearly a trillion people and near-people and synthetic people scattered across several thousand inhabited worlds. Everyone in Gillian's circle was younger than she, sometimes by ten or twenty decades, and they didn't care to even imagine an existence without Thinkers or their powerful gifts. These were the people most likely to tsk-tsk her salad-for-two stories. One young man — a lover who proved unworthy after just a few painful weeks — was cruel enough to point out what other people only thought:

"Maybe your story's true, Gillian. Sure, I'll give you that. But the machines took over long ago. And where's your savior? Tell me that."

Gillian knew almost exactly where Jason Popper was. A tiny expert inside her insatiable mind was devoted to tracking his motions and activities, at least as far as public laws and her personal tastes allowed. At the present moment, the great old man was living in seclusion on Earth, splitting his days between three heavily protected mansions.

Of course the "Where is he?" question had occurred to her. Many times.

"But what Jason imagined happening hasn't happened," she offered. "Because people are still in charge, obviously."

"Who's talking now?" he snapped. "A human female, or the Thinker rooted in the female's helpless cortex?"

That sour man soon vanished from her life.

Then later, while attending a huge party celebrating another successful stage in the ongoing terraforming of Titan, Gillian found herself sharing air with a young-looking woman whom she didn't recognize and who didn't offer any name.

Gillian didn't even mention Jason Popper.

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Yet the woman knew her story. She brought it up, and showing a smug grin, she told the tale in full, right down to the "salad-for-two" line.

"Who are you?" Gillian asked.

"You should ask how I know this."

"I don't care how," Gillian lied.

But the woman was proud, explaining in rigorous detail all the convoluted pathways that taught her what wasn't really important at all.

Again, Gillian asked, "Who are you?"

The woman looked young, but with an old-style human body, not unlike hers. And she was pretty in the same basic ways. Except of course everyone was beautiful, and it didn't have to mean anything at all.

But an intuition took hold of Gillian.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"My name is Sally Novak, and I'm five and a half years older than you." Then the woman laughed, soaking up all the pleasure from this long-anticipated moment. "I used to work at a health club down the block from your old grocery. Mr. Popper was one of our members, and he always made a point of chatting with me. You know how. In that flirty, didn't-mean-much way of his."

Gillian checked that sketch against a thousand data pools, discovering that the woman might well be telling the truth.

"On my last day at work," Sally said, "Jason handed me a card and gift."

The punch line was obvious.

"Like he did with you, he promised to rescue me when the machines took over."

Gillian's intellect easily absorbed this epiphany, but her emotions took a few moments longer.

"And do you know what else, darling?"

"What?" Gillian managed.

"Over the years, I've met nearly fifty women like you and me. That seedy old boyfriend of ours was having his fun with us. That's what I think. Which begs the question: How many other girls were there that we still don't know about?"

The moment was embarrassing and difficult. But more than anything, it brought to Gillian a distinct, infectious pleasure.

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Her life had been long and unexpected — a comfortable, well-to-do existence — and she had grown accustomed to wielding several kinds of genius inside her rebuilt head. But that one moment taught her that it was still possible, not to mention wondrous and delicious, to be so surprised that the body could swoon in the weak gravity, begging permission to fall down.

TIME WAS VAST but always finite, while space would remain two breaths short of infinite; and those were just two components in a multiverse built upon branes and inflationary events, marauding singularities and impossible-fields that worked together to generate every kind of imaginable creation, plus a few more. When given its chance, sentient life always grew to understand that it was inevitably and profoundly tiny. Any intellect, once magnified with a top-flight Thinker, ceased to live in a place of genuine importance. Humanity had been washed clean of tyrants and great souls. Even Jason Popper was important for the famous things done in the deep past. No matter what Gillian might accomplish in her coming days, one girl's history would always be narrow and brief. She might meet ten billion people, but those were just a rough sampling of the vivid souls occupying one end of the galaxy. She could live on a thousand worlds, but that left trillions of beautiful realms that would never know the shape of her hand or the soft, shy pressure of her eyes. And the mind behind those eyes had to pose inevitable questions: Why do you feel this nagging, pernicious sense of loss? And what exactly is it that you believe you are missing?

Years later, Gillian returned to Earth for an extended visit. The world she remembered was gone now, replaced with a crowded, busy, and exceptionally lovely terrain that in no way resembled the place of her birth. With the patience of a woman blessed with time, she stayed with a succession of relatives and old friends, and like any tourist, she tried to absorb the sights and tastes of this new place. Sometimes, seemingly by accident, traces of Jason Popper came forward to be noticed. An acquaintance spotted him hiking in the mountains on the new Pacifica continent, while another claimed that he was right now circumnavigating the globe in a stratospheric glider. Other voices claimed he was investing in a

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speculative new company using SETI-acquired technologies — an intentional lie, it later turned out, in a useless bid to stir up investors in a soon-to-fail venture. Then rumors surfaced that the old man was building a submarine, planning to dive deeper than anyone ever had into the Jovian atmosphere. Or was he assembling a starship that would take him to the Centauri suns or the galaxy's heart? And then came the day when knowledgeable sources sadly reported that the man who was among the ten or twelve most responsible for this new world had just fallen ill, suffering from a nameless ailment that was stubbornly resisting every doctor's healing touch.

All of those stories had been told before. Gillian had heard variations of them on Titan, and she imagined she would hear them again, probably for another hundred thousand years. But that was to be expected: To the best of his ability, the man was a recluse, and into his absence flowed every bit of nonsense and spectacular speculation.

But here Gillian was, practically standing in Jason's backyard, and why not make good use of her opportunity?

Once the decision was made, it took less than a second for her quick mind to formulate a worthy plan.

Identifying the recluse's location was the trick. He owned three mansions, each surrounded by walled estates constantly shielded from curious eyes. But the man she knew wouldn't hide in those kinds of places, she reasoned. Too inelegant, and in their own fashion, far too constricting. For several days, she sat alone in a quiet room tucked inside her grandniece's giant house, and in that carefully maintained darkness, she remembered everything about the man who used to visit her in that little neighborhood grocery.

One evening, in a loud voice nobody else could hear, she announced, "I know where to find him."

Ten hours later, she arrived at the front gate of a modest farm at the southern end of Old Italy. A thousand threads of evidence had brought her to this place — electronic traffic and robot traffic, the strangely perfect weather and a few hectares of heavily tilled land that were dedicated to an assortment of heirloom crops.

She could be wrong, yes. But really, where was the harm? Alone, she pressed an old-fashioned button that set loose a series of quiet musical

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bells. But the bells went unanswered. Invisible eyes watched her standing patiently in the ruddy, early morning light. She felt their mechanical gaze, and she listened carefully to birds singing and the warm wind. And then, just as she reached for the button again, a scrubbed voice came from no particular location, asking, "What do you want, my dear?"

"A salad for two," she replied, smiling.

Again, silence washed over her.

Gillian's patience left her. Nervous frustration — not a popular emotion among modern souls — led to a small, untidy rage. In a single breath, she told the voice her name and the essentials of her story, and when she quit talking, she realized that the heavy oak gate had been pulled open, and on the other side of it stood an ageless and very fit gentleman who was studying her with his own curious brown eyes.

Quietly, Jason Popper said, "Hello, my dear."

Again, softly this time, she said, "'Salad for two.'"

But then with a sad shake of the head, the man said, "No. You must be confused. Gillian, is it? It's been a very long time, and yes, in my day I've bought a few groceries. But no matter how hard I try, I can't remember you.

"And my dear, I don't believe you remember me either...."

BEYOND THE GATE stood a massive old oak tree, and in its trunk's shadow waited a long iron bench where two people who didn't know one another could sit with distance between them. The very old man invited that slightly younger woman to tell her story again, in detail.

Gillian talked about the grocery and her favorite customer, and then with a string of telling details, she described her last day of work and the spooky walk to the car and how Jason Popper had driven up alongside her and given her a best-wishes card as well as the hundred-dollar bills —

And she paused, arms crossing on her bent-forward chest. "You're saying this didn't happen," she muttered. "Well then, where did my money come from? How could I have afforded your stock in the first place?"

Jason smiled for a moment. "When you graduated from high school, your grandmother gave you those shares as a gift."

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Why did that sound a little familiar?

He pulled a small reader from his hip pocket and showed her a sequence of transaction files that had been uncovered in just the last several seconds. According to what she read, her mother's mother had bought the stock for Gillian, as well as shares in several other new companies that had long since died.

Once again, Jason prompted her to tell her story.

But Gillian could only touch on those next decades. Confused and a little scared, she had to ask, "Why didn't anyone notice that I was lying? These are public records, and you found them easily enough...."

"Yes, I did."

The man had a pleasant, patient smile.

She thought for a moment, and then she said, "Oh."

"Yes?"

"None of this story's true, is it?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

"I never got a gift from you. Not money or card, or anything. And now that I think about it...I'm not sure you even lived in my home city...."

"For what's it worth, I did visit once. But that was before you were born."

"And I never mentioned you to my friends or lovers. Everything in my head...I don't think it was there last year, or even last week." She slumped back against the seat, and with a soft, lost sob, she said, "I think I dreamed this story up yesterday. And believed it, somehow."

"Is that so?"

"I think I must be crazy," she muttered.

Which for some reason made him laugh. Then he touched her for the first and final time, on the knee, the hand hard and warm and strong in the ways that a gardener's hand would be, patting her a few times before pulling away again. "No, you're not crazy. And the fault is entirely my own, what's happening to you. Nobody can wear the blame but me."

The Three Laws protected humanity from the machines, and giving those Laws teeth were hundreds of legal refinements and thousands of wetware programs, plus an army of monitoring agents as well as one bureaucratic empire purposefully starved of creativity or the barest

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interest in changing the status quo. But more than just that impressive array of public resolve defended humanity. There were subtle, secretive tools at work too. One device was the brainchild of Jason Popper. Or perhaps more than one...but he confessed to a single pernicious program buried deep in the workings of the first Thinker that Gillian had implanted into her skull.

"This is my guess," Jason reported. "You've enjoyed a fine long life, and with time, you've grown accustomed to your augmented mind. But no complex system is perfectly static; no army of safeguards can forever defend every last one of your borders. Coming home to the Earth was the trigger, perhaps. Or maybe this would have happened on Titan. I cannot say for certain. But let's assume that familiar skies and the taste of this particular wind brought back memories of pre-Thinker days, and naturally you began measuring what you are today against what you used to be.

"You're homesick, Gillian. Not for a place or even a time, but for that innocent young girl.

"A little harmless longing doesn't matter, of course. Everybody does it. But that expression, 'Salad for two,' is a coded cry for help. And 'The machines take over,' has a much more transparent meaning. Together, those phrases should tell an informed observer that the organic portion of your consciousness is losing too much ground to its artificial parts. And even more alarming is this elaborate daydream of yours. Which isn't really yours, by the way."

"Then whose is it?"

"Mine, I suppose. There's a string of implanted partial memories that I created. They're inside you and millions like you, ready to be woven into anyone's life story, fragments of a narrative that each person will believe wholly and act upon accordingly. Should they ever be needed, that is.

"What happened to you, Gillian...quite suddenly you remembered having met me. You wove me into a long ago job, and your daydream told you that our relationship was close enough to be friendly. In the story are just enough clues to lead you to my home. Which is exactly what I intended. Everyone who embraced that first generation of Thinkers is similarly equipped. Each of you has a warning sign, and from that, the possibility of escape."

Jason paused.

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Gillian stared at her hands — at the backs of her hands and the long palms — and then she closed her eyes, asking, "What do I do?"

"There are quite a few technical fixes," Jason allowed. "But first you'll need to decide what is genuinely you and what that 'you' desires."

"Can I have everything artificial removed?"

"If that's what you wish."

She offered several less radical options.

"Everything is possible, Gillian."

Panic took hold. Sitting in the warm shade, in air suffused with the odors of tomatoes and basil, Gillian began to shiver. "I don't know what I want," she confessed. "I have no idea what to do...not at all...."

Jason watched her with a measure of sympathy. But despite his patience and earnestness, she had the strong impression that he had done just this many times before.

She asked, "Are there others? Like me?"

"Of course," he allowed.

"And do they come here, hunting for you?"

"If they're on the Earth, they will. Eventually." He shrugged, adding, "But this is why I allow myself to be found. I'm a fortunate person, and I owe the world a great deal. And believe me, I feel an obligation to help where I can."

"I want to talk to these other people," she said.

Jason might or might not have expected that answer. But after another nod, he said, "That seems only reasonable."

"How often?"

"Do they come to my gate?" Jason Popper sighed and stood again. "Sit here and wait, Gillian. If that's what you wish. And if I happen to get another visitor today, answer on my behalf. How's that for a plan?"

"I guess I can try."

Then the great man reached beneath the bench, into a weathered cupboard, and took out a wide wooden bowl. The bowl was clean but scarred by fork tines and a thousand different hands. "You've been through a lot," he said. "You're probably hungry. If you want, make yourself a salad while you wait."

But Gillian barely had time to pick a few greens before the bell at the gate began, quietly but insistently and with much purpose, to ring.

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Jim Aikin's first fiction sale was to our magazine back in our Feb. 1981 issue. He went on to publish two more stories with us in the 1980s, as well as two novels, Walk the Moons Road *and* The Wall at the Edge of the World. *In recent years, he has been writing for music technology magazines like* Mix, Keyboard, Electronic Musician, *and* Virtual Instruments, *and by his own description, he considered himself "an ex-fiction writer." His muse, however, had other plans for him — for which we thank her.*

Run! Run!

By Jim Aikin

AN ADULT UNICORN IS larger than a pony, though smaller than a horse. Its limbs are as lean and lithe as a deer's, its mane and tail equine, generous, and silky as spider-weave. The males have a goatee of the same hair, which gives them a contemplative look. All unicorns are pure white, but the horns of the males have a thin spiral of blue that runs from the base out to the tip, the females a spiral of gold. At night the horn of a unicorn glows faintly, with a cool unwavering light.

Unicorns have a distinctive odor, somewhere between cinnamon and candle wax. They will eat grass, but they prefer fresh flower petals. An adult can eat seven or eight pounds of flower petals a day, after which its droppings are a swirl of colors, a clotted rainbow.

My daughters know nothing about unicorns. As far as I know, they have never seen one. They may not even know the word. Certainly no one has ever told them about the unicorns their grandfather once kept on his farm outside of Elmira, New York. They never knew their grandfather, for that matter. I wonder — what should I tell them? How much should I tell them?

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When I was their age (Cecile is eleven, Faith eight — how quickly they grow!), unicorns were a fact of our lives. We knew we mustn't talk about them, my sister Leonore and I, not to anybody, but they were always there, off in the south paddock nibbling on flower petals, which in the winter my father had flown in from Central America in large bales. I suppose the truck drivers might have wondered about those shipments, but my father had a way of putting people at ease without saying much. He was a quiet, comfortable man, and I miss him very much. My mother had died when I was only a baby and Leonore not much older, so I never knew her, and Father seldom spoke of her. Once in a while he would say, "Your mother's looking down from Heaven, and she's smiling" — or, if we were misbehaving, "Your mother's looking down from Heaven. Do you want her to see you doing that?" But he took good care of us, and our life on the farm seemed to me complete.

The south paddock was well screened from the road by a line of trees, and there was little traffic on the road. If the unicorns — there were usually seven or eight of them — were glimpsed from the road, they would have been thought horses. At night their horns, twinkling among the trees as they ran, might have been mistaken for boys chasing across the field with flashlights.

Father brought the first unicorn home the year before I was born. I suppose Mother must have thought he had gone mad, but he never spoke of that. The unicorn — I knew her, years later, as Sparky — was a foal, and had no horn yet, no more than a nub on her forehead. He found her at the edge of the woods, a trembling little thing. He thought at first the foal must be an albino deer, its mother shot by a hunter. Deer hunters were not uncommon in the woods around our farm, so he may have been right about the fate of the mother. When the foal failed to thrive on mare's milk, I believe he brought the veterinarian in to look at her. The vet, Dr. Land, must have known at once what she was. In later years my father paid Dr. Land what he called a monthly retainer for his services, though by the time I was five or six we had no animals left other than the unicorns, an aging, arthritic spaniel, and an entirely self-sufficient cat. Dr. Land was a Godly man, and it would be a slander to say he took my father's money to keep quiet about the unicorns, but I can't think of any other explanation.

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I was born in the seventh year after the Final Conversion of the Heathen. All the world at last was Christian, which must have set Satan gnashing his teeth! The Mohammedans, the Chinese Communists, even the Jews had converted, one and all, and been baptized. At last, after centuries of struggle, the United States was a Christian nation. Prayer was heard every morning in every school, every unborn child was safe in the womb, and not one soul would have dreamed of giving voice to the atheistic ideas that had once been so disgustingly common.

Or so it's said. I'm a little hazy on what those atheistic ideas might have been, because no one repeats them anymore. Why should we?

What I hope my daughters would understand, if I were to tell them about the unicorns, was that their grandfather was a Godly man too. Perhaps not as fervent as some, but Leonore and I were taken faithfully to church every Sunday in Elmira, and on Wednesday nights to Bible study at the Christian center down the road. There was no evil in him, not that I ever saw. But there is evil in all of us, I know it's true. I can't deny that Father strayed from the Word of the Lord.

The last summer when there were unicorns at the farm, I was fifteen and Leonore was seventeen. She had fallen very much in love with Timothy McFadden, the son of our local pastor. It was expected that Tim would follow in his father's footsteps and join the clergy. Poor Leonore! It was hardly to be expected that Tim would notice her, with so many girls vying for his attention.

She would have had an easier time of it if we lived closer to town, because she was pretty, and had truly accepted Jesus Christ into her heart. She would have made a wonderful wife for a minister! But Father had too much work to do on the farm to drive her to Monday night choir practice or to the Saturday youth picnics, which was where the boys and girls mainly had a chance to socialize. He had acreage in alfalfa, and apple orchards, and he never had quite enough hired hands to do the work. I don't know whether it was because he couldn't afford the hands — the unicorns must have been a constant drain on our finances — or whether he was worried that the hands would wander out to the south paddock and see something he didn't want them to see.

I never knew how the unicorns arrived on the farm, or when one would. They may have scented one another. One day there would be seven

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in the herd, the next day eight, the newcomer not hard to spot — burrs in his mane and tail, perhaps with a limp or scratches left by barbed wire, wild-eyed when Father approached, bolting to the far end of the paddock and not easily soothed.

How did a newcomer ever get into the paddock? I've often wondered that. Sometimes I think any of them could have leapt the fence at any time, that they stayed only because they wanted to. Sometimes I think they knew how to lift the latch of the gate using their horns, and let the newcomer in themselves. But I suppose it's possible that Father was part of a network of secret unicorn fanciers, and was known to be good with wild ones. Possibly a truck would pull up, well past midnight when Leonore and I were safely dreaming, and the animal would be unloaded and led out to the paddock.

Father never cajoled a newly arrived unicorn, or tried to coax. He just set out the feed, saw to the water, and let the beast get used to his presence in its own time. A month might pass before it would let him curry it. Occasionally they favored me instead of Father, especially as I got older. There was one male that I named Charger, who would always come close when I appeared at the fence. After I fed him, he would — sometimes, not always — permit me to comb his silky mane with my fingers.

"Could I ride Charger?" I asked Father once. "Could we saddle him like a horse?"

Father shook his head. "A unicorn can never be saddled. They won't stand for it. Years ago I heard it said you could possibly mount one and ride it bareback, but you wouldn't want to, Mary."

"Why not?"

"If you mount a unicorn, it will run off bearing you, swift as the wind. It will never tire and never stop, and you'll never be able to dismount again. When at last Jesus calls the faithful up to sit beside Him in Heaven, you'll still be astride the unicorn, and you'll be left behind."

I think he must have made that up, just to keep me from spooking Charger and possibly breaking my leg or my skull when I got thrown off. I don't honestly know where he might have met anyone who could tell him a single thing about unicorns. He told me once about a thing called the Internet, which had flourished when he was younger. You could meet almost anyone on the Internet, he said, or read about no end of wicked,

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sinful things. But after the Final Conversion of the Heathen, Godless things like the Internet were no longer needed.

I think he would have found a way to take Leonore to choir practice and Saturday picnics, if I had wanted to go too. That's why I have to shoulder some of the blame for what happened. I should have been more interested in socializing, but I had always been a shy, moody, awkward girl. I knew if we went, Leonore would get all the attention while I'd be left standing off in a corner by myself, a miserable lump. I much preferred to stay home and look after the unicorns. Not that they needed much looking after; but if I held out a handful of tulip petals, one would edge closer, curious but skittish, and eventually nibble daintily from my hand.

Sometimes I think Leonore was jealous. They would never eat from her hand, but then she never truly tried. She was always too impatient. She would twitch, or make some wry comment under her breath, and then the unicorn would bound away to the far side of the paddock, where it would gaze at her reproachfully or go back to cropping daisies.

But saying she was jealous isn't fair to her. In truth, our father should not have had the unicorns in the first place. Reverend McFadden delivered several heartfelt sermons every year describing how Satan would tempt the faithful with seeming miracles. Father sat there and listened to the sermons, and nodded and said, "Amen," but it was as if he never heard a word. So maybe Satan had entered into his heart. I don't like to think so, but Satan never rests. He's always looking for an opening. I know this.

Leonore would have done anything — well, almost anything — to get Tim McFadden to notice and approve of her. But Father and I were being no help. It was as if we had entered into a sort of pact and shut poor Leonore out. At the dinner table we would talk mostly about the unicorns. Was Sparky or Noble the faster runner? Would Desdemona foal this year? Leonore would sit there, poking at her food. Through gritted teeth she would say, "Could we please talk about something else?"

In the end, it was too much for such a good Christian soul to bear.

The first we knew about what she had done was when Reverend McFadden and four of five of the church elders appeared at our gate one Saturday morning. They wouldn't enter the property, but called out to Father: "We need to speak with you, Mr. Pritchard."

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He went striding out to meet them. I had heard them drive up, and came out on the front porch to listen.

"We've received a disturbing report," Reverend McFadden said. He was a portly man, always well dressed, but his eyes were set close together, which made him look as if he was squinting even when he wasn't. "We understand you're harboring horned animals on the property."

"I don't know who would have told you that," my father said.

"Someone who is in a position to know. Can you tell us, then, on your word as a Christian, is it true or is it not?"

"If I tell you it's not, that's as good as calling another man a liar, am I right?"

"That would be one way of looking at it, I suppose."

"Well, I don't think I could do that," Father said. "If a man utters a falsehood, or says anything against me meaning to hurt me, it's between him and his God. It's not for me to judge him."

That set them back, but not by much. "Would it disturb you," Reverend McFadden went on, "if we were to come onto your property and see for ourselves?"

"No!" I cried. "Don't let them!"

Father never turned toward me. "Go into the house, Mary," he said over his shoulder. "Let me deal with this."

I slipped through the front door, and I think the screen banged a little, though I didn't mean it to. My heart was skipping so fast I couldn't breathe.

Leonore was standing at the foot of the stairs, her hand on the newel post. She was smirking.

"You!" I clenched my fist. "You told them!"

"What if I did?" she said archly. "There's no place in God's creation for devil-beasts. You'd know that perfectly well if you hadn't been picking your nose all through Bible study. We'll all be happier when they're gone."

I would like to think she truly believed that. I wouldn't like to think she did it to hurt Father and me; she is far too pure and good ever to have let such a temptation into her heart. Of course she must have thought she would impress Tim McFadden with how upstanding a Christian she was, how vigilant against the wiles of Satan. That was the main reason.

I stomped past her up the stairs to my room, and threw the pillows across the room and wept. Out the window I saw Father leading the men

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toward the back paddock. They weren't out there more than five minutes before they came back. Reverend McFadden was leading the way almost at a trot, as if he couldn't wait to get off of our place. "Put them down, Mr. Pritchard," he said. "Put them down! You have a rifle. Use it."

Father went out to the front gate to see them off, and then came into the house. I heard him moving around downstairs, and then the awful creak of the rusty old hinges as he opened the gun cabinet.

I knew what I had to do. But when I burst out of my room, Leonore was standing in the hall right in front of me. "Where do you think you're going, missy?" I tried to get past her to the back stairs, but she shifted to block my path. "Want to say good-bye to your precious Charger?" She laughed. "The sooner you forget about him the better."

May God forgive me. I hit my sister with my fist and knocked her down. I think surprise showed in her eyes, but I was already past her, leaping down the back stairs three at a time.

I raced out to the paddock. All the way, I kept looking over my shoulder, but I didn't see Father coming.

I threw open the gate, charged into the paddock, and ran at the unicorns, waving my arms. "Run! Run! You have to run!" They tried to stay away from me in the enclosed space, shy creatures that they were, so when I got to the far side of the paddock and circled back I was able to herd them out the gate, even that year's half-grown foal, Jewel.

Unicorns are much faster than horses, when they want to be. They can run like the wind itself. By the time Father came down from the house carrying his rifle, they had raced away. I could still hear their hoofbeats receding, or thought I could, but they had vanished from view. I was standing at the open gate hugging myself, shivering uncontrollably, though it was a warm day. "They're gone," I said.

"Did you open the gate, then?"

"No, it was open when I got here. I think those — the men from the church must have forgotten to latch it." I don't know why I lied. Was it because I didn't want Father to punish me? Or because I wanted the church elders to bear the blame for the unicorns being gone? Either way, it was a sin.

Father might have known I had lied, but he never said a word. He put his arm around my shoulders and led me back into the house.

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It turned out I had split Leonore's lip when I hit her. She had bled all over the upstairs hall carpet, and Father had to drive her into town to get stitches. She wouldn't speak to me for a month, and I don't think she ever quite forgave me. Father never said a word about what had happened that afternoon, never again spoke about the unicorns at all. But it was like someone had switched off the light in his heart. After supper he would sit in the front room and not turn on a lamp or listen to the Gospel hour on the radio, just sit there in the dark all evening.

Once I walked in on him, sitting there in the dark, and saw he had the rifle cradled in his lap. That scared me a lot. But the next morning the rifle was locked up in the gun cabinet again, and later I found the key to the gun cabinet lying on my dresser. I hid it, which I guess was what he wanted me to do.

Leonore married a man named Howard Stith and they moved away to Indiana. She sends me Christmas greetings full of chatty news about her family, but we almost never talk on the phone. The year after she got married, Father died, and I closed up the farm and sold it. That was when I found the key to the gun cabinet, still tucked away in the bottom of my sock drawer. This was all a long time ago. I got married too, to a fine upstanding man, and now I have two daughters of my own. I wish they had known their grandfather, but I never talk about him. What would I say?

At night sometimes, as I lie in bed waiting for sleep to come, I think I hear, somewhere very far away, unicorns galloping, galloping like the wind. I imagine their manes and tails streaming out behind them as they run, the cool glow of their horns flickering among the trees like loose moonlight. I imagine what it would be like to ride one.

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CURIOSITIES

LETTERS ON DEMONOLOGY AND WITCHCRAFT, BY SIR WALTER SCOTT (1830)

IN ILL health following a stroke, Scott (1771-1832) wrote *Letters* at the behest of his son-in-law, J. G. Lockhart, who worked for a publishing firm. Scott chose his unusual format (for a demonology) as a series of ten letters written to one John Lockhart. It proved popular and Scott was paid six hundred pounds, which he desperately needed. (Despite his success as a novelist, Scott was almost ruined when the Ballantyne publishing firm, where he was a partner, went bankrupt in 1826.)

Written when educated society believed itself in enlightened times due to advances in modern science and forsaking the superstition of darker ages, *Letters* reveals that all social classes still held belief in ghosts, witches, warlocks, fairies, elves, diabolism, the occult, and even werewolves (*Letter Seven*). Sourcing from prior sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on demonology along with contemporary accounts from England, Europe, and North America (Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi*, for one), Scott's discourses on the psychological, religious, physical, and preternatural explanations for these beliefs are essential reading for acolytes of the dark and macabre; the letters dealing with witch hunts, trials (*Letters Eight* and *Nine*), and torture are morbidly compelling.

Scott was neither fully pro-rational modernity nor totally anti-superstitious past, as his skepticism of one of the "new" sciences (skullology, as he calls it) is made clear in a private letter to a friend. Thus, *Letters* is also a personal and intellectual examination of conflicting belief systems, when popular science began to challenge superstition in earnest.

—Dave Truesdale

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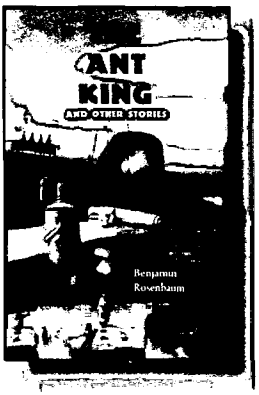
In **Benjamin Rosenbaum's** debut, *The Ant King and Other Stories,* he explores the weird, the pulpy, and the surreal. Incudes "Start the Clock" and the title story from *F&SF.* Rosenbaum's stories have been reprinted in *The Year's Best Science Fiction, Feeling Very Strange, Harper's,* and *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror.*



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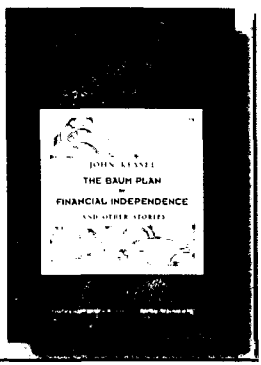

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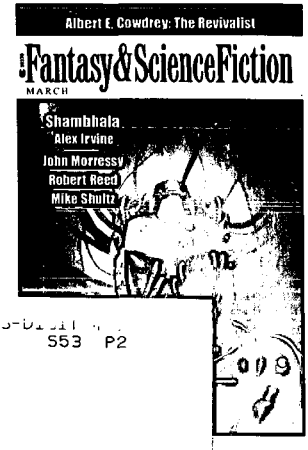

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